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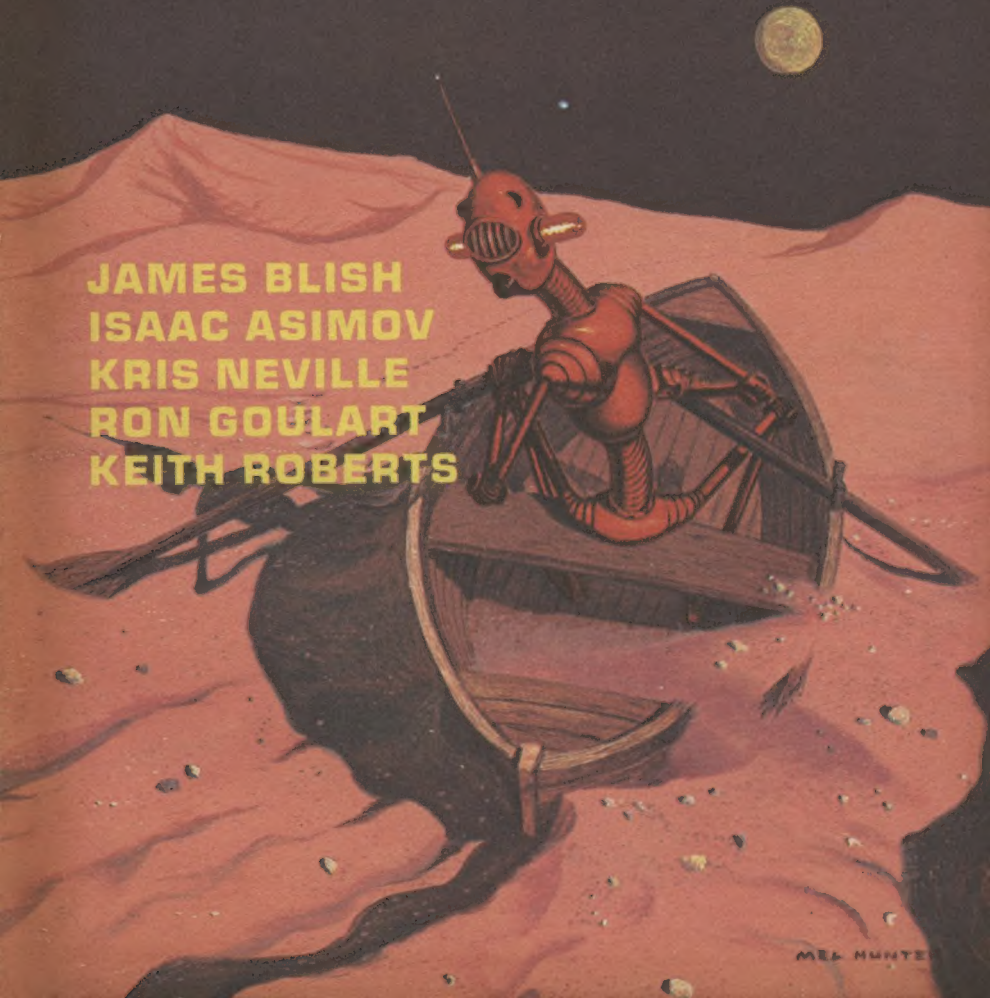

JAMES BLISH
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Fantasy and Science Fiction

DECEMBER • 22ND YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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As promised, here is a second story about Anita, who is a fun-loving, man-loving witch. Here, the object of her affection is a young veterinarian, who proceeds through an examination of Anita's frisky menagerie with increasingly chaotic and funny results.

JUNIOR PARTNER

by Keith Roberts

THE TALL YOUNG LADY TACKED down the street, slightly encumbered by a large Persil soap box. From the box came ominous sounds. She paused outside the doctor's office, regarded the door, and tried to enter. Frontways was impossible, she couldn't get hold of the catch. Sideways was a little difficult as well; she eventually made it backwards, arriving inside more than a little tousled. She plumped down on the bench that ran round three sides of the waiting room, set the box beside her, and puffed vigorously. Several pairs of eyes regarded her stonily; she simpered, adjusted her dress, crossed her legs sedately, and composed herself to wait. From the box came a thud, followed by a long and muffled howl. She rapped the thing sharply. "Vortigern," she hissed, *"behave yourself . . ."*

The box seemed oblivious. It bulged in several places; then a steady chewing began. Across the room a little old lady, clutching an ill-wrapped budgerigar cage, began to look apprehensive. "My dear," she said nervously, "is that a . . . cat you have there?"

Anita nodded somberly. "I suppose you could call it that . . ."

The corner of the box gave suddenly, and a weird head protruded. It was tinted a delicate lilac color, and fairly large. Its ears were small, pointed and set rather too close together on top of its skull. Its eyes were most strange. A quick glance would have suggested they were invisible; a second would have confirmed it. The old lady squealed. Anita gave

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the apparition a smart thump and it vanished. There were further sounds of destruction from within. "It's quite all right," she explained airily. "He doesn't like budgies very much; they give him hiccups—"

The old lady squeaked again and vanished precipitately through the door. Anita stared after her vaguely surprised. As her Granny was fond of insisting, there was "no accountin' fer 'oomans . . ."

The inner door opened. Anita's heart skipped a few beats, settled back to its normal position. The dress she was wearing didn't simplify the operation. A boxer came out with its ear bandaged, and Anita saw a bit of *him*. Just his hand actually, holding the door, but he had lovely nails. "Next, please," he called.

She had to wait a considerable time for her turn. She was preceded by an unhappy Alsatian with a hacking cough, a Basenji with eczema, a Labrador puppy come for his Epivax Plus, and something indeterminate with a long, whippy tail that had got its fool paw shut in a door. When she finally penetrated the inner sanctum, the street door was closed against further callers, and the soapbox was showing definite signs of fatigue. Mr. MacGregor, the junior partner, was very sympathetic; but for some reason Anita found it hard to speak. He was quite tall and had a sort of long, solemn face and a little dark-blond moustache and the saddest, most Celtic-blue eyes . . .

The carton sat between them on the table, vibrating with rage, "It's always the same," gulped Anita. "It's boxes, I think. They sort of send him into a delirium—"

Mooowwww . . . pptthhhhh . . .

"Aye," said Mr. MacGregor, circling cautiously. "Aye, it's a . . . cat, then . . ."

"Yes," said Anita. "Well, actually . . ."

The question was solved once and for all by the appearance of Vortigern. The box, having done all that cardboard could be expected to do, gave with a sigh. Vortigern bobbed, spat, slashed at Anita, missed, contacted Mr. MacGregor more satisfactorily, squalled again, and left the table with something of the speed and fury of a Polaris missile. Anita shrieked, "Vortigern, *please* . . ."

The next few minutes were hectic. Bottles smashed, cupboards reeled, blood was shed brightly on the neat-tiled floor. It ended with Vortigern, tired of exhibitions, lying in Anita's lap purring like the bastard he was while she rubbed his tummy. Mr. MacGregor approached him carefully. "Well, Hell," he said, shocked into profanity. "What the Devil d'ye call *that* . . ."

"Vortigern," said Anita stoutly.

"He's *sweet* really, but he's . . . er . . . rather shy with strangers." She simpered again. "Not very good with men," she added brightly.

The patient showed signs of renewing battle. Anita hissed in his ear. "I'll tell *Gran* . . ." Vortigern subsided.

Mr. MacGregor rubbed his face. His thumb had nearly stopped bleeding now; he was in command of the situation again. "Well . . . what would ye say's the matter wi' him, Miss . . ."

"Thompson," said Anita rapidly. "Anita Thompson. We live at the back of Foxhanger. We haven't got an address really, but if you take the Wellingborough road up by Wicksteed's Park and turn off at—"

"Aye," said Mr. MacGregor. "The . . . er . . . the cat . . ."

"Oh, of course. Silly . . . Well, he's . . . off his food," said Anita. She looked slightly anxious; she'd known this would be the difficult bit.

The junior partner frowned, cocked an eyebrow, and looked stern. He made as if to prod Vortigern in the paunch. Vortigern said very plainly, *"Don't* . . ." He didn't. "Aye, well," he said. "Well, we'd best hae a wee look. Can ye put him on the table there . . ."

Five minutes of cautious testing, and Mr. MacGregor pronounced his opinion. "He's awfu' fat," he said. "But there isna a thing apart frae that, that I can see . . . He wilna hurt noo, for gaein' *shorrt* . . ."

Anita bridled. "He's got his nerves bad then," she cooed. "Poor little thing. There, wouldn't the nasty man help 'oo den? Come to mummy . . ."

"I didna say that," corrected the vet hastily. "Mebbe he cuild stand in need of a wee *tonic* . . ." He vanished into a cupboard, emerged with a bottle of pills. "Aboot three times a day," he said. "We'll have him . . . er . . . fit, in noo time . . ."

Anita looked rapturous. "Oh, Mr. MacGregor," she said. "I just *knew* you'd put him right . . ."

Re-crating Vortigern proved a problem. His original container was evidently past useful service. Mr. MacGregor grubbed about till he found a cat basket. Anita promised joyfully to return it the following night. "Have ye a car, Miss Thompson?" asked the vet as he saw her out.

"Oh, no . . ." Anita looked dejected. "We're rather poor, we can't afford anything like that. And I suppose I've missed the last bus now." She brightened. "But it's all right, it's only six miles. We'll be there in no time. Come on, Vortigern . . . g'night . . ."

"Here," called Mr. MacGregor hastily. "Here, I say . . ."

The Lagonda was superb. She had a fabric body, which suited Anita nicely. As a rule she de-

tested car riding; steel is uncomfortably like iron, and at the best of times she hated being surrounded by metal. Mr. MacGregor drove her almost to the cottage door. He would have come further, but Anita demurred; Granny Thompson was a disconcertingly light sleeper. Anita watched the headlights from her bedroom window as they lurched back toward the main road. "He's so masterful," she thought as she unhooked her bra. "And just fancy him having a car like that, oh, he's *perfect* . . ." She slid into bed, wriggled, mumbled, kissed the pillow; a moment later she sat upright in the dark. "His *color,*" she said, awed. "An' his *eyes.* He didn't even ask me about his eyes. I must have made a hit . . ." She subsided again, dreamily. "I can't possibly *spell* him," was her last conscious thought. "He's too sweet, it just wouldn't be fair . . ."

Granny Thompson was up first in the morning, by an hour or more. Anita, wandering downstairs to breakfast, sensed an atmosphere and waited guardedly for the storm to break. It didn't take long.

" 'Oo were that bloke," demanded her Granny sternly, "wot brought you 'um larst night?"

Anita addressed herself to her cornflakes. "Just a friend," she said vaguely.

No answer. She looked up. Granny Thompson was standing regarding her with a certain expression on her face. "His name was Mr. MacGregor," said Anita hastily. "He's very swe—"

"MacGregor?" The old lady yelled spectacularly. *"MacGregor?* Ent there enough blokes down 'ere for yer but wot you 'as ter goo orf consortin' wi' *furriners* . . . Gret 'ulkin' car there thumpin' an' rattlin' arf the night, kent get no sleep fer love ner—"

"He's *not* a foreigner," said Anita, stung to the quick. "He's the vet. Well, the junior one . . ."

"Vet . . . ?" Granny Thompson whooped, clutching instinctively for her stick. "Vets, vets, wot do we want with a *vet* . . . Ter see the time om put in on yer an' orl; spells, they come out yer *ears,* an' you cavortin' with a *vet* . . ." She paused, suddenly anxious. "Gel," she said, "wot were up?"

"Ohh . . ." said Anita. "Oh, Gran, really, you're impossible. It wasn't me, it was Vortigern."

A sudden light came into the old lady's eyes. Anita should have been warned but for once she didn't notice. "May I *arsk,*" said the elder Thompson with ominous politeness, "wot were up with *'im* then?"

"He's off his food," said Anita, playing the lie to the last. "Poor little thing, he could hardly drag himself outside to—"

"Food?" Granny Thompson's

voice rose several octaves; a window pane buzzed in agony. "*Food . . .* ?" She collected herself with difficulty. "I'll 'ave you know, my gel," she said, seething, "this mornin', it should 'a bin kippers. Only 'Is Majesty, 'im wot kent *et,* scraunched 'is way inter the pantry cubberd and 'ad the *lot,* an' weer 'e is now I'd give ten years o' me life ter *know . . .*"

Anita imagined a plate of hairy kippers glaring up at her and smiled beatifically. Even Vortigern couldn't be evil all the time; accidents were bound to happen.

"Well," said Mr. MacGregor. "He's a mair *ordinary* sort of creature than yon . . . what did ye say the name of it was?"

"Vortigern?"

"Aye," said the vet. "Tell me, Miss, the . . . er . . . *color* of him . . . how on earth . . ."

"He had a little accident," said Anita tartly. "With some dye."

"Aye," said Mr. MacGregor, not very happily. "Aye, I see . . . noo what's the matter wi' this one . . . ?"

Anita stroked Winijou's back. He wriggled and fawned, kinking his tail, blinking his shocking eyes. At least Winijou had been no fuss; he'd got into the basket straightaway, as soon as he'd realized what she wanted.

"He isn't mousing," said Anita promptly. "And you were *so* good with Vortigern, he's getting so much benefit, I just had to—"

"Aye," said the vet, rubbing his jaw. "Aye, I see . . . Miss . . . er . . . Thompson, was there no a wee bitty commotion when ye arrived . . . ?"

"It wasn't his fault," said Anita quickly. "This silly great Samoyed poked its nose into his basket and . . . well, you wouldn't like it either, would you?" she finished defensively.

"Hmm . . ." said Mr. MacGregor. He was touching Winijou gently, prodding and kneading. "And his trouble ye say is, he canna catch a moose?"

"Not one," said Anita. "He used to get . . . gosh, seven or eight a day at least but it's been positively *weeks* now and I told Granny and she said it was all right but I just sort of had to bring him along because I'm sure it isn't natural and I was afraid he might be pining or something awful and you were so good with Vortigern I thought if there was anything wrong you would be bound to know and I was so *sure* you could put him right, I mean . . ."

"If ye'd just hold him a wee minute . . ." Mr. MacGregor was inspecting ears.

"Of course . . ." Then, tentatively, "Mr. MacGregor . . ."

"Yes?"

"Did you . . . get home all right? Last night?"

"I got stuck in a ditch," said the vet shortly. "I got home at three o'

the mornin'. It took twa cranes an' a breakdoon truck tae get me oot."

"Oh, gosh . . ." Anita gulped and blinked her huge eyes. "I'm *terribly* sorry . . ."

"There's no' a discairnable thing wrong wi' this animal," said Mr. MacGregor sharply. "Noo have ye considered the possibility that ye've simply and straightforwardly run oot o' *meece?*"

"Oh, we can't have done. We can hear them . . . scampering . . . all over . . ." Anita's voice trailed off. Her lower lip trembled momentarily. She looked down, then back to Mr. MacGregor. She said hopefully, "Nerves . . . "

"Nairves," said the vet, walking toward his cupboard. "Aye, of course. There's always *nairves* . . ."

Vortigern's tablets had been bright blue; these were white, with little pink splotches all over them.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Anita again. "I've put you to an awful lot of trouble."

"Aye," said Mr. MacGregor uncompromisingly. "Tell me, Miss, have ye many *mair* animals?"

She nodded happily. "Hundreds . . ."

He winced. "Well . . . aye. If ye have any further trouble, just come along and see me, or Mr. Hodge-Sutton . . ."

Anita looked shocked. "Oh, I'd never do *that*. I'm very satisfied with *you* . . ."

"Aye," he said gruffly. "Well, ye'd best run on the noo, Miss Thompson; ye have a bus at . . . let me see, eight thairty-two I believe . . ."

Anita left on the wings of the blast.

It hadn't been too bad though. After all he had looked up her bus times, that must prove something. And there were compensations. She hadn't expected the car trick to work twice anyway, and Winijou, riding home on her shoulder, caused a most satisfying sensation.

"In the ole days," said Granny Thompson with heavy sarcasm, "afore we orl *knew* 'ow iggerant we were, we used ter mek our own jollop. An' wot's more, it *worked* . . . Wot 'e needs," she said, warming to her theme, "is a right good turnout . . ."

"Gran, don't be *beastly* . . ." Anita was attempting to restrain something in a wicker basket. Oddly shaped limbs protruded, apparently at random; she pushed the last one inside, shut the lid and fastened it gratefully. A mewing began, terminating in a series of little concussions like squeaky barks. The basket bulged as its occupant brought a few pairs of legs to bear. "Never 'eard nothink *like* it," muttered the elder Thompson. "Wot are we orl supposed to be *'ere* fer, that's wot I'd like ter know. Jumped-up young blokes smart-aleckin' about tekkin' the

bread out of our mouths . . . An' mind you ent *late*. An' dunt bring that gret *charrabang* back uvver ner more . . ." Her voice rose as Anita receded down the garden path. "Else I shall tek 'and in things, my gel, an' if I do yer'll *both know summat* . . ." She slammed the kitchen door, hobbled back to the living room and her abandoned crochet work. *"Vets,"* she muttered balefully. "I knows wot 'er game is ter *start* with. It ent *them* wot needs lookin' to," she continued, banging herself down in her chair. She picked up her work, smoothed it, and began again, old fingers nimble. "Well, the sooner it's uvver," she soliloquized, "the sooner we kin *orl* get some peace . . ."

Winijou, sitting by the empty hearth, washed an ear and agreed.

Mr. MacGregor peered into the basket and recoiled. "Guid *God,"* he said faintly. "What *is* it . . . ?"

Anita pulled the little creature out. It had an indeterminate number of arms and legs, all kicking. Several pairs wrapped themselves instantly round her wrist. Admittedly it wasn't one of her Granny's more attractive efforts, but it did have nice fur, and its eyes were rather lovely. There were four of them, placed in pairs one above the other. "It's Jarmara," she said. "And she's very sick. She's got a tummyache, she told me . . ."

Mr. MacGregor produced a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, polished them, and put them on. They made him look divine. The inspection, it seemed, hardly helped; he took the specs off again, shuddering, and put them away. Jarmara squalled; then an arm that seemed possessed of telescopic properties shot out, clamped itself firmly on the junior partner's tie.

The situation began to deteriorate almost at once. Mr. MacGregor, thoroughly upset, began plunging and snorting. Jarmara, even more alarmed, let go and climbed onto her mistress's head, wailing to be taken home. Anita backed, convulsively, and there was a vast and complicated crash. A cupboard tipped sideways, bottles rolled, filling the office with a rich stink of ether. Jarmara promptly forswore all human contact and took to the wall, along which she ran with surprising speed. Anita wailed, sensing disaster, and made a flying grab. She missed, and became somehow entangled with Mr. MacGregor. The Familiar reached a ventilator, hissed with disgust, and vanished through it; galumphing noises sounded instantly as a well-packed waiting room took to its collective heels. Children yelped and skittered; old ladies clutching mewing containers to their bosoms hobbled grim-faced away. In the doorway a small, nervous-looking man, en-

cumbered by an overweight spaniel, collided briefly with a distraught person with Eton crop and jeans, in charge of a deeply disturbed bull-mastiff. The creature vanished rapidly into the middle distance, its owner clinging to the lead and digging her heels in as brakes; her attitude somewhat resembled that of a water-skier behind a motor boat. A final flurry of exiting bodies, and peace descended at last.

Anita sat up puffing. Her hair had fallen across her face, and her skirt, she knew already, had split nearly up to her behind. Mr. MacGregor seemed equally dazed. His collar had burst from its stud, his tie was awry, and something exceedingly violet had splashed across the front of his shirt, creating an interesting Palm Beach effect. He eyed Anita silently; Anita watched back. In the quiet there was a scraping sound and a faint mew. Jarmara, tired of the outside world, reappeared at the ventilator, squelched happily down the wall, and bounced into her mistress's arms. Anita simpered, opened her mouth, closed it, and tried again. "Please, Mr. MacGregor," she said in her smallest voice, "I think she's better now . . ."

Anita broached the whole business of Mr. MacGregor to her Granny. "It just won't sort of develop," she said unhappily. "It went like a bomb to start with, you know, the car an' that; but things have just got worse. Last night was awful, Jarmara was a positive little beast. I've been dozens of times now, I've taken all sorts of things, and he's terribly sweet, but I just can't get any *further* . . ." She hung her head. "I just . . . don't think he *likes* me . . ."

"Stuff," said Granny Thompson irritably. "Never 'eard nothink like it, not in orl me born days. Wot, you, with orl the powers yore got, moonin' an' mullockin' about . . . om a-tired of 'earin' yer goo on. Clap one on 'im, my gel, if yer kent do it no other way. Come ter think on it, I'll do it for yer meself. Keep me 'and in . . ." She rose, hitching at her sleeves. "It's bin a year or two since I were called on fer anythink like this," she said grimly. "But if I kent sort 'im out, my name ent Maude Thompson . . ."

Anita yelped. "No, please . . . !" She hung onto the old lady's spell-arm. "You just don't understand, Gran, you can't do that. I should *die,* it'd be *awful* . . ."

"Well, yer'll 'ave ter do *summat,*" snapped the elder Thompson. "Om fed up wi' yer *maungin',* straight Lam. Grown gel like you, never come acrorst the like . . . if it ent *one* bloke," said Granny maliciously, "it's *another.* An' if it ent 'im, it's somebody else . . .

Gel'll be the death on me yit . . ."

"I shall just have to try again," said Anita desperately. "But it's awful, Gran. He's told me so much about himself, about wanting his own practice and all that; and he's so clever, he really deserves it, but he'll never do it while he's with that awful Mr. Hodge-Sutton. He's supposed to be a partner but he's positively *working* for him. And I hate him, all he cares about is walking round the cattle-market on Fridays with those awful leather gaiter-things and he's got horrible light-blue eyes, all cold. I don't think he even *cares* about things getting hurt an' that, he's only in it for the money. Mr. MacGregor is so much better than he is, but he'll never get a chance . . ." She brooded, chin in hands. "I don't suppose I've really been much help either," she finished sadly.

Granny Thompson fixed her granddaughter with a beady eye. "No, my gel," she said with some asperity. "I dun't esspect you *'ave* . . ."

The waiting room seemed more deserted than usual. Anita wandered about, looking at pictures and diplomas, holding the paper bag clutched in her hand. She was in a high state of nervous tension; when she put her hand on her dress below the bosom, she could positively feel her heart thudding. The only way though was to *tell* him, just tell him straight out, and let things sort themselves out . . .

She was uncomfortably aware that the lack of clients had to do with her own frequent visits. She revolved in her mind, gloomily, various means of setting things to rights. A few malicious spells scattered about would soon increase the flow of patients again, but she hated casting them. She had to be really worked up and in a rage before she could be efficiently evil. She was too preoccupied to hear the office door open, though the "Yes, please," penetrated her awareness. She trotted in, clutching the bag, which by now had begun to writhe. "Mr. MacGregor, I just had to come and see you," she started breathlessly. "I found a poor little—*eeeghh* . . ."

She gulped, eyes wide, hand to her mouth. Mr. Hodge-Sutton stood smiling in a very nasty way, stroking his chin, and glittering at her with his little ice-chip eyes. Anita backed instinctively, but it was no use, she was caught. "Mr. MacGregor was called out rather suddenly," said Mr. Hodge-Sutton. "So I'm handling the office for him. Now if you'd be good enough to close that door, young lady, we can have a little chat. I've been wanting to meet you for some time . . ."

"So that's that," said Anita mis-

erably. "He was *awful,* Gran. He said I'd . . . spoiled his p-practice playing practical jokes, an' he'd . . . put the police on us, and sue us and everything. An' he said . . . if I went back any more it would only cause trouble for Mr. MacGregor, an' then Catch got out an' Mr. Hodge-Sutton got his ear bitten, you know what Catch is like when he's scared, an' I ran away an' . . . it was *awful,* just *awful* . . . An' I . . . can't see Mr. MacGregor any more, not ever, an' I feel so . . . awful, I'm going to wail and wander and . . . oh, I shall probably die . . ."

The air-tremblings ceased. Granny Thompson's knitting needles clicked on unabated. "Stuff," she said silently. "Om *tole* yer wot ter do orlready, only yer too *sorft.* Yer wunt ketch no sympathy orf me. If yore too big, my gel, that's yore lookout. I shen't worrit, one way or the other . . ."

Silence.

"Anita?" The thought hung on the air, questing. There was no answer.

Granny Thompson hobbled to the cottage door, peered out. The trees of Foxhanger hung silent, their leaves like new green coins. A spring wind moaned among the branches, swept into the fields and away across the wet red earth. The old lady shut the cottage door with a bang. "Jist git *on* with it then," she muttered balefully. "Yore'll come 'um when yer'be 'ad enough . . . 'Oomans, bah. More trouble than they're wuth, the 'ole pack on 'em." She settled back in her chair. "It's the time o' years, I esspect," she said. "Allus the same, the gel is. *Mooney,* no good ter 'erself or 'oomans or 'Im Wot's Down Under . . . Jist git *on* with it, that's orl om gotta say . . ."

Far away, the wind wailed in pain.

The mantel clock ticked the hours, and the quarters. Scufflings sounded in the thatch and cupboards of the cottage. The place was full of Familiars; Anita's activities had brought them in from miles around. "Allus trippin' uvver *summat,*" muttered Granny fiercely. "Nearly *went* four times yisdey. 'Edge'ogs orl day *Sat'y,* the day afore that it were snakes . . . an' that there thing on the stairs this mornin', wot that were I *dun't* know . . ."

Silence redescended.

It was an odd thing; Anita was never noisy, yet without her the cottage seemed hushed as a graveyard. The tickings and scrapings and rustlings didn't count somehow, there was no aliveness. Granny champed irritably, threw her knitting down, picked it up, made two stitches, dropped one, and tossed it down again. She looked at the clock and frowned.

A sudden squalling fight broke out behind the sofa. At least one of the combatants was clearly rec-

ognizable. Granny's face lit with sudden resolve. She rose, reaching for her stick. "Vortigern," she said pleasantly, "come out 'ere a minute, will yer?"

Pssshhh.

"Out," snapped Granny. "Yer gret square 'ead . . ."

FFFTTTT . . .

Granny Thompson made a pass with her stick. A small ball of blue light appeared, balanced on its tip. "When I sez 'out,' " she remarked amiably, "I means *now,* not a week come *Toosdey* . . ." She flicked the spell across the room. It whipped under the sofa; there was a muffled bang and an explosion of cursing. Vortigern appeared, slightly scorched and with more haste than dignity. He crouched in front of Granny flattening his ears and glaring with his nonexistent eyes. "That's more *like* it," said the old lady sternly. Then, "Wheer's orl the others, cat? The big 'uns? Pyewacket, Ilemauzar, Vinegar Tom?"

Vortigern stamped, waving his tail. He indicated many directions; north and south, east and west. "Orlright then," said Granny Thompson determinedly, the light of battle in her eye. "Goo on orf an' fetch 'em. On got a job for yer; it'll tek orl on yer there is . . ."

Mr. MacGregor had got home late and bad-tempered from a whole series of emergency calls, all foisted on him for one reason or another by his senior partner. The flat over the office seemed cheerless and cold despite the mildness of the spring night. He yawned, searched the 'fridge for the last of yesterday's chicken, and made himself a mug of coffee. He undressed, brushed his teeth, and took the meal to bed with him. He read through the terrier notes in *Dog World,* checked certain small interests in the *Financial Times,* and finished the day with an Ian Fleming. At midnight he yawned and shut the book. He put the light off, rolled over and was asleep within minutes. He felt, literally, dog-tired.

The noise startled him upright. He sat listening in darkness. The telephone? No, please, God. Not the telephone . . .

The sound came again. It certainly wasn't the phone. It sounded, in fact, like one of the original Bells of Hell. Mr. MacGregor rose hastily, tied his dressing gown round him, and padded downstairs, switching on lights as he went. He found nothing. A window behind the office was ajar. He closed it and plodded back upstairs, yawning prodigiously. He got into bed, clicked off the light, and composed himself luxuriously for sleep.

Booowwwww pssstttzzzzzz. . .

Mr. MacGregor bounded up again with an oath. The noise repeated itself, accompanied this

time by a vast, tinkling crash from the next room. The junior partner dashed onto the landing. He was in time to see a large, impossibly colored form vanishing down the stairs.

"That bliddy girl," howled Mr. MacGregor. "And her bliddy mogs . . . And the whole bliddy—" He passed, abruptly, into Gaelic. He began a futile pursuit; futile because Vortigern had never before had the chance to do so much damage in such a good cause and was putting his heart and what passed for his soul into it. Lights swung, cupboards crashed, furniture reeled; the Familiar finished his act by flying up the waiting-room chimney, leaving Mr. MacGregor enveloped in a cloud of long-accumulated soot. The vet rushed back upstairs. By the time he reached the landing, incidents were taking place in a dozen different corners of the building. There was wailing, chittering, plopping, scratching, clucking, maunging; something improbable was scuttling giddyingly round the bedroom ceiling, something else had gone to ground beneath the highboy and was now apparently trying to heave the thing onto its back, while a process taking place in the bathroom was giving rise to sounds that defied analysis.

Mr. MacGregor, eyes popping and face crimson with rage, began hauling on his clothes. The investiture was not without incident. Something dive-bombed him as he stopped to lace his shoes; another oddity scuttled between his feet and nearly sent him sprawling. *Things* appeared to have taken over the entire property. The vet dived for a cupboard, backed out carrying a treasured possession, a walking stick, gnarled, silver-mounted and extremely heavy. He straightened up breathing furiously, and the war started in earnest.

An hour of furious activity served to evict all but the most determined of the invaders. Then Mr. MacGregor, still seeing commonplace objects as if through thin sheets of pastel red, ran for his garage, grabbing up keys and flashlight on the way. This affair was going to be settled once and for all.

He stopped the Lagonda nearly an hour later, seething with rage and hopelessly lost. He'd taken the right turning off the main road, he was sure of that; but in the moonlight the woods and the maze of little gated byways that wandered through them were hopelessly confusing. He switched off engine and headlights, reached for the doorcatch. A few yards back he'd seen a signpost. If he could get his bearings again, that would be something; he'd deal with the rest of the matter in the morning. He opened the door, swung his feet to the ground.

Something furry and infinitely

long went past and went past and went past. Mr. MacGregor, hoisted unexpectedly onto its back, waved his stick wildly in attempts to keep his balance. Granny Thompson had worked well; she had enlisted the aid of Aggie Everett's troupe of Familiars, some of which were even more improbable than her own. This one seeemed to be possessed of innumerable pairs of twinkling feet; it also had a distressing trick of vertical undulation. Mr. MacGregor landed a dozen yards away, feeling he'd had a free cruise on the Loch Ness monster. He straightened carefully, breathing through his nose. Once more the night was scarlet and pink; through the veils he saw, dimly, the Thing humping across a field. Round it a score of lesser shapes skittered and bobbed.

In the junior partner's veins ran the blood of wild ancestors; in fact in his cups he had been heard to boast of his descent from the great Rob Roy himself. *"Yaarrr . . ."* he bellowed, beside himself at last. *"Hoots, yaheerrrr . . ."* He whirled the stick like a claymore, and dashed in pursuit.

He came round slowly, to the accompaniment of numerous groans, and opened his eyes. Above him, infinitely far away, hung a sky spangled with stars and milk. His head was resting on something soft; it moved when he did, whimpering faintly. He raised himself further, wished he hadn't, and fell back. Hands touched his face. "I thought you were dead," sobbed Anita. "I th-thought you were dead . . ."

He sat up again, more carefully. Her hair was across her face; tear-tracks marked her cheeks, glinting prettily in the moonlight. "You s-slipped," she said. "You must have caught yourself an awful bang . . ."

Mr. MacGregor touched his brow, carefully; then memory returned with a rush. *"You . . . !* What the Hell did ye mean, sendin' those . . . creatures tae plague a man . . ."

"I didn't!" She jumped to her feet furiously, breasts heaving under her ragged, thin old jumper, fists clenched. *"I didn't . . . !* I saw you r-running, an' then you slipped, an' I thought you were dead an' now—now I wish you were. I know you hate me," she went on rapidly. "An' . . . an' I don't care. I hate you as well, so there . . ."

Something strange happened; some effect, maybe, of concussion and moonlight. Mr. MacGregor took her shoulders, shook her. "Here," he said. "Here, noo . . ."

"Go away! I hate you, I don't want to see you again ever. I don't know what happened. I think G-Gran sent the things but I don't care. I'm glad you bumped your head, I hope your car gets stuck again as well—"

"Miss Thompson," he said desperately, "please . . ." He drew himself up, straightened his collar. "I wish ye'd desist," he said. "I have something tae say tae ye . . ."

"Don't want to know!"

"Aye," said Mr. MacGregor sadly. "Happen ye don't, but I'll say it no'withstanding. I have a . . . cairtain feeling for ye, Miss Thompson, and it distresses me tae see ye cry . . ."

Anita stopped abruptly, raising a ravaged face. "Gosh," she said. "You . . . said it, Alex. You said it! That was what was wrong all along, you were shy . . ."

She launched herself precipitately. Mr. MacGregor tried to jump aside, but he was far too slow.

The office was neat and bright. Red tiles covered the floor; there were businesslike ranges of cupboards, and a large refrigerator. In the middle of the room was a shiny table that wheezed obediently up and down at the pressure of a variety of levers. Above it was a big lighting fixture that could also be swung about to suit. Mr. MacGregor was hard at work bandaging a spaniel's paw. Anita hovered at his elbow, immaculate in a spotless white overall, its top pocket full of Biros and thermometers. She handed pads and bandages with an air of detached professionalism; when the job was finished, she lifted the animal down, restored it to its anxious owner. The last patient of the day was admitted, a disgruntled Pekingese that had swallowed a ball of string. Leastways its owner said it had swallowed a ball of string, and it had been coughing for hours.

Anita concentrated. "Yes," she said. "That's right enough, the silly little thing. I can see it all knotted about." She made a quick pass with her hands. The air round the table became faintly luminous; the animal's coat jumped in several places. "It's all right now," she said. "It's all in bits, it won't cause any bother."

Mr. MacGregor looked vaguely unhappy. "Y'know," he said thoughtfully, "though I wouldna' deny the *help* ye are, I tak' tae wonderin', sometimes, aboot the *ethics* . . ."

"Pooh," said Anita. She tossed her head. "You've got your new surgery, and you're famous already. You deserve to be anyway, you're miles better than old Hodge-Sutton. And what about *my* ethics?" She untied her coat and stretched. "I'll just go and phone Mrs. Featherington-Massey to tell her Chang Poo's all right. Then you can take me home. Unless you can think of something better . . ." She grinned maliciously, and was gone.

She picked the phone up and dialed, waited till it was an-

swered. While she was waiting she smirked once more at the wall. She was finding life extremely interesting these days. She'd always fancied herself doing something like this, it was a sort of Florence Nightingale complex with a leg at each corner. And after all she'd always believed in the relief of suffering, especially her own.

INSURANCE

Treat disaster casually
or it may take you seriously too.
Your heart may not self-seal
like a punctured gas tank
in a combat plane.
We may sink forever in flames
forgetting which nation we fought for—which children
which in-laws which open-ended trusts.
We may circle in whooshes of fire through Dante's hells
till we have melted his ultimate glacier
till we are ready to begin all over.
Don't say I didn't warn you:
You've got to treat disaster casually
like Alfred with those cakes.

—Doris Pitkin Buck

BOOKS

Joanna Russ: AND CHAOS DIED. Ace Books, N. Y., 1970; 189 pp., paper, 75¢

Confronted with this book, some pontifical ass of a reviewer is bound to rule that "it isn't a novel at all, only a padded short story." Though there are about as many characters as the average novel offers, for about half the course of the story the hero is separated from the other important people and has to deal only with a procession of spear-carriers. Though the structure has some deliberate kinks in it, the plot is fundamentally simpler and more straightforward than that of the usual novel; and only two of the characters have any real depth (though they are all very much alive).

Never mind. The late E. M. Forster, who certainly knew a novel when he saw one, never arrived at any more satisfactory definition of one than "a work of fiction of some length." And Miss Russ has kept this one simple in some of the traditional areas because what she tried to do was immensely difficult and required masses of complex detail. Briefly, she is out to show you what it *feels like* to be a telepath.

Sensibly, her viewpoint character, a complex man named Jai Vedh, does not start out as a telepath. For half the book, he and a starship captain—the only figure in the book who comes close to being a caricature—are marooned on a planet where all the people have all of the usual "psionic" abilities, including teleportation and levitation. (In Miss Russ's system, unlike Heinlein's, any one of these abilities *necessarily* implies all the others.) How they got that way isn't revealed until the next to last page, and you won't guess it ahead of time, either. Slowly, Jai develops these talents too.

Since the chances are good that nobody has ever actually *been* a telepath, the author has had to invent the appropriate accompanying sensations from the ground up, and she does it brilliantly. She has had the insight to recognize that the world-view of such a person would have to be almost entirely different from our own. Through Jai Vedh, she leads you into it step by step, in a social milieu which would be relatively unstressful for a beginner—rural surroundings and a small popu-

lation all of whom are sympathetic toward the beginner.

Then Jai Vedh and the Captain are rescued and taken to overcrowded Earth, along with a native girl, Evne, with whom he is in love (though at the beginning he was a most convincing homosexual). Novels about the overpopulated future are fairly common now, but none of them I've encountered look at that future from the inside in the way this one does. The ability to travel anywhere and to read minds obviously enormously increases the hero's ability to plumb this world (with which he'd previously been familiar from the outside), but it also increases the potential confusion in his mind, and the author only barely manages to keep these conflicting tendencies in balance.

This is not a novel that can be skimmed; if you skip one sentence, the next one will make you feel as though you'd lost your mind, or the author hers. The totality is impressive not only for its inventiveness and the brilliance of its technique, but because the fantastic central assumption has been used to tell you real things about the real human psyche. Joanna Russ can no longer be called a promising writer. She's a delivering one.

John Boyd: THE RAKEHELLS OF HEAVEN. Weybright and Talley, $5.50, 1969; 184 pp., boards,

This novel by the author of the much-praised THE LAST STARSHIP FROM EARTH is (despite its page count) considerably longer than the Russ and more complicated in conventional plot. It is also a very mixed bag, in which almost every strength is almost exactly cancelled out by a corresponding weakness.

Its two major characters—a pair of astronauts—show so many quirks and complexities of behavior that they could easily be mistaken for live people; but in fact only the narrator, a self-deluding evangelist, struck me as real, while his antagonist came through in the end as a collection of funny hats. The other-planetary culture and ecology which they visit, and revolutionize, is full of brilliant inventions, but they don't cohere or convince. Much would-be ironic use of points from comparative religion is made to keep the plot going, but in the end all this learning (which, I could show, has been hastily swotted up, anyhow) is there only for a joke. Boyd has a huge vocabulary of scientific and technical terms, but seems to understand very few of them—for example, the planet visited in the book is in another *galaxy,* for chrissake, and the round trip to it takes only a year (a gimmick which is finally used to justify time-travel, for the sake of a cheap switch). Parts of the book are very funny, but most of

its humor is the kind of wisecracking which blemishes the work of such people as Heinlein, G. O. Smith, G. Harry Stine, Walt & Leigh Richmond, and Joe Poyer (to stack these writers in approximately descending order). The narrative charges forward like a whole company of fire engines, only to arrive at a climax that could have been crushed into extinction by Smoky the Bear.

Making these strictures stick would take up my whole column, and since the book is for all its apparatus not the least bit pretentious, that would waste everyone's time. Primarily, it's a shaggy Boy Scout joke, as told by an Eagle Scoutmaster. It won't do you any harm to watch him fly by—in fact, you'll probably enjoy the performance—but I wouldn't risk looking up to it if I were you.

Brian W. Aldiss: BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD. Doubleday, New York, 1970; 281 pp., boards, $4.95

The setting for this extraordinary achievement is a Europe which has been through a war fought with psychedelic agents; its characters are madmen bombed (both literally and in the slang sense) "back into the Stone Age" with shattered memories of their old cultures still sticking to them. Its hero, Colin Charteris, like the central figure of most recent Aldiss, is a lonely man on a physical odyssey which is also a search for himself, crippled by being 90 percent a product of the madness of his time, and surrounded or assaulted by figures who are totally immersed in and victimized by it. He has had a partial revelation or insight which gives him a vague sense of destiny, and between this and several apparent accidents he becomes a messiah to his fellows, and, briefly, to himself. The result is catastrophic and he tries to pull out—but by the end, he is en route to becoming a sort of divinity after all, that is, a myth.

This plot summary is so oversimplified as to be downright simple-minded, but I begin with it because the book presents a language problem through which the story is at first difficult to see. To convey the thoughts of his madmen, Aldiss gradually but inexorably adapts the composite tongue called "Eurish" which James Joyce invented for FINNEGANS WAKE. Joyce used these smashed and reassembled fragments ("the abnihilization of the etym") to tell a complex dream, but they are equally appropriate here, and Aldiss manages them very well for the most part. Unlike Joyce, Aldiss places the easiest passages at the beginning (in *FW*, the easiest chapter begins on page 169!) and gives the reader an opportunity to become used to the idiom the first time through the

book. In short, he's given you a fair chance; and persistence will bring considerable rewards.

One of them is that this novel, unlike most modern science fiction, can be mined; it is not simply a diagram or a Tale, but a world, with rich veins beneath the surface. Among these is the biological hypothesis that modern man is stuck with equipment (particularly mental equipment) which served well enough in the Neolithic Age but is of increasingly less use as man's world multiplies in complexity. Aldiss never once says this directly, but instead makes it active in the fiction: the characters find themselves trapped in a series of repetitive actual and spiritual experiences, and thanks to the dazzlement created by the language, neither they nor the reader can ever be sure that a given event really is a repetition, or instead a totally new happening being thought about in an inadequate, inappropriate old way.

Here Aldiss departs decisively from Joyce, for in *FW* the Vician cyclical view of history is intended to be taken as a fact of nature: history does repeat itself, endlessly, in various guises, and therefore it is appropriate to tell the story of one such cycle as if it were all of them happening together. Aldiss, on the other hand, has distorted Ouspenski's mystical experience of "the eternal return" to a completely subjective end; history may not in fact repeat itself, but we are going to go on, suicidally, thinking and behaving as if it did.

Almost every aspect of the book, large and small, reinforces and enriches this view of what H. G. Wells, in his last book, called "mind at the end of its tether." The epigraph from General LeMay, and the title of the novel itself, sound the first warnings. The crux of the novel is Charteris' realization that he has allowed himself to be kidded into sainthood, and the next step is probably crucifixion. He breaks away from his escalating success to seek a new pattern, but since he's stuck with the old equipment, the best he can do is to stop seeking patterns at all, to retreat into ambiguity. He cannot, of course, have it both ways. In a reflective passage, we are told that Charteris was originally named Dusan (a Serbian emperor who fell while he was on his way to conquer Byzantium). By rejecting him and his name, Charteris has committed the repetitive event of not winning himself glory before the story even begins. Angeline, the only loving character, is what that idiot Dr. Edmund Bergler would have called a psychic masochist: she repeatedly, helplessly falls in love with suicidal false messiahs. By the time Charteris is in love with her, she is out of love (and patience) with him, and he in turn

hasn't the equipment to tell her he loves her. He has literally forgotten both the fact itself and how to say it. The repetitive car crash sequences are the product of stone-age brains unable to cope with modern speeds, and in addition are symbolic of the awful speeding up of all events as the book proceeds. The very town of Dover, where an important part of the action takes place is in living fact just as repetitive an experience as Aldiss paints it as being. People who should be acting remain mired instead in nostalgia (e.g., for Glenn Miller, a childhood memory for some of the characters, a pseudo-memory for the others) or Wordsworthian nature mysticism. Even the imagery is repetitive.

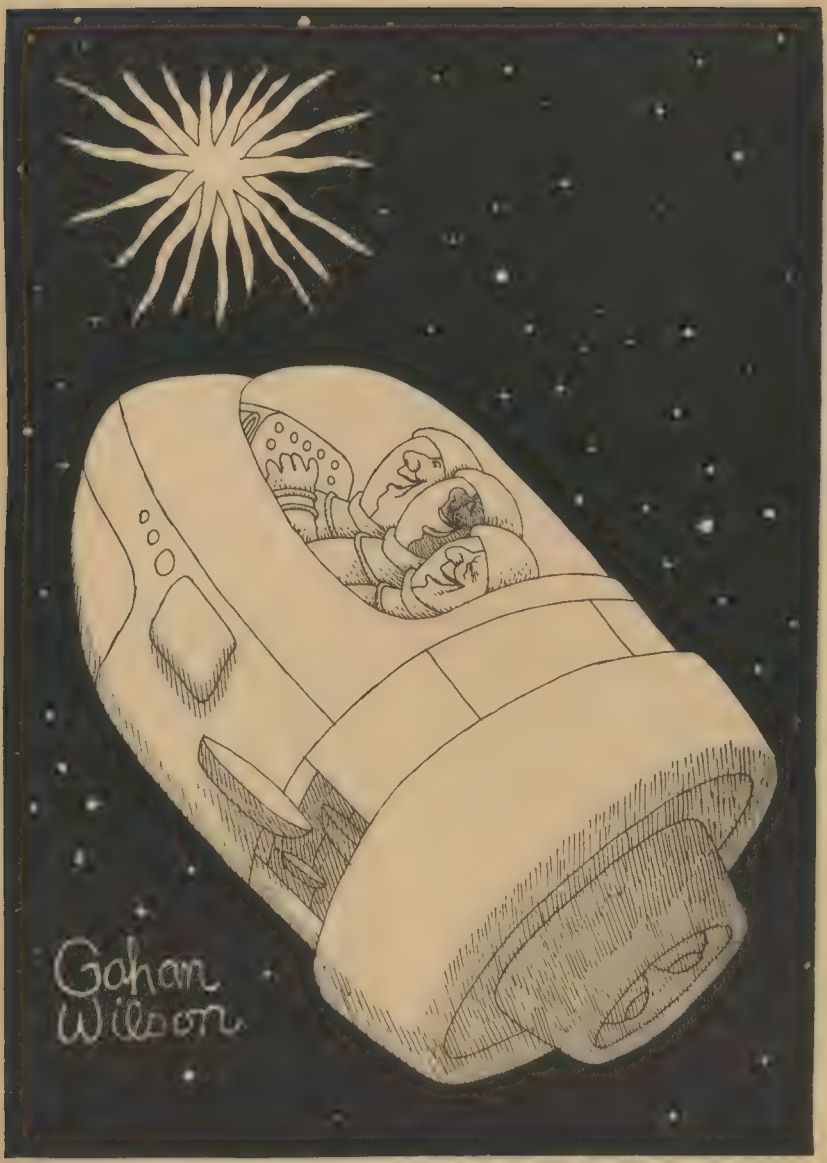
Some of this technique was foreshadowed in REPORT ON PROBABILITY A, but BAREFOOT is not an anti-novel; it is evolutionary. Although the hippies who are its people (none of them hippies by their own choice, but the parallels are clear) are incapable of building any new order, the artist can; that is, he can take a situation which is inexorably emptying itself of all meaning, and by re-ordering it, create a structure which in itself has meaning. That is what Aldiss has done.

Harry Harrison: THE DALETH EFFECT. Putnam, New York, 1970; 217 pp., boards, $4.95

Aldiss' novel is called "A European Fantasia"; this one is European too, though most of it is set in Denmark, a country barely known to most otherwise cosmopolitan authors and fans. Otherwise, however, it is quite straightforward—a driving action story of the effect of an unexpected discovery in the field of spaceflight, and its effects both on world politics and upon the complex characters who have to try to keep it *out* of world politics.

The Daleth Effect itself is a magical device with close generic and specific relationships to the Dean Drive, and Harrison doesn't attempt to explain it; it is the story's only "given," from which all else flows logically, in the classic manner of H. G. Wells. And in addition, this is a cautionary tale, like the best of Wells; Harrison has something to say about the habit of "Security" as a mode of thought which bears pondering. It has been said before in sf, but never, to my knowledge, this well.

Considered solely as a novel of technological espionage, it could have been simply another crazy extravaganza like a James Bond or U.N.C.L.E. episode. But it isn't. The total effect, in fact, is at once as exciting and as somber as John le Carre . . . though not, I am afraid, as well written. Well, you can't have everything. This is worth buying, and worth pondering. —JAMES BLISH



"We three kings of Orient are . . ."

After much too long an absence, Mr. Neville returns to these pages with a short piece of humor of the black and pointed variety, about a typical meeting between the president and his psychiatrist.

The Reality Machine

by Kris Neville

A. L. HAMBERGER M.D., NOTED that the President had now kept him waiting ten minutes beyond the accustomed time. The President was angry with him about the news leak on his latest proposal. The leak was certainly no fault of his. A typical childishness that he had come, on occasion, to expect.

Dr. Hamberger felt a moment of panic that perhaps the appointment would not be kept at all. An abyss gaped in his soul. But he dismissed this reaction as characteristic of the paranoia which sometimes seemed to affect some of the less stable of the President's close advisers. The President was secretive by nature, going off for long periods by himself—or for secret consultations with members of his official family (one could not be entirely sure which), the results of such meditations and/or conferences never being explicitly revealed. This habit of the man engendered suspicion in certain quarters and gave rise to fruitless speculations regarding what he was really thinking about. Particularly when, as Dr. Hamberger knew, crackpots frequently worked their way into the President's confidences, feeding certain weaknesses in his character much as, say, writers cater to the whims of editors, or interns to surgeons.

Dr. Hamberger had been aware of this tendency toward paranoia for a long time, and he strongly resisted it in his own thoughts on

every occasion. The President had a difficult job. He could destroy mankind, if he had to: he was the most powerful individual who ever lived. He was almost like a god, when you came down to it.

Dr. Hamberger was always reasssured when he entered the oval office, for Dr. Hamberger was an expert in emotional diseases, having for the last fifteen years followed this specialty in preference to dermatology, in which he had been trained.

Long ago, in fact, the relationship had been professional, but now it continued merely out of the warm regard and affection the physician felt for the President as a man. Or at least that was the *major* component in the relationship. This was in the best tradition of American medicine, seldom practiced in this day and age when everyone was out for a buck. In some small way, which he had to keep secret from the public, Dr. Hamberger felt he was advancing the humanitarian aspects of his calling.

Dr. Hamberger had come up with this arrangement when the fee-for-service interaction had been leaked to the press, and they had somehow implied that the President desperately needed the services of a psychiatrist. Which, of course, was not the actual fact at all, in the first place. The President was being made uncomfortable by a number of trivial physical disabilities, such as shortness of breath and a tendency to sleep 20 hours a day, both of which were of psychosomatic origin and could be easily controlled with nominal therapy. You could hardly call him badly disturbed.

Dr. Hamberger, in fact, was a man of many solutions—not only of individuals' problems, but the nation's as well. One of which was bringing him considerable distress, unsolicited publicity, and was now responsible for the unaccustomed delay of the appointment. Dr. Hamberger did not plan to make anything out of the delay. Let the President see, once again, that he was a kindly adviser, who could never relinquish warm feelings merely because of trivial discourtesies. He could understand, if not agree as to the justice of, the President's annoyance.

Fifteen minutes after the appointed hour—he had tea and a pleasant chat with the President twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 3:00 pm—Dr. Hamberger was summoned into the President's office. He always encouraged the President to lie on the couch, since the man needed all the rest he could get, and this was how he found him now.

Customarily, Dr. Hamberger opened the discussion with a few remarks on the Reality Machine. It was his hope eventually to effect a change of policy in this matter, and it was this hope (he

sometimes felt) that stimulated his interest in these twice-weekly conversations and caused him never to cancel one in spite of occasional personal inconvenience. "I hope you thought over our discussion last week. I honestly believe it's making people paranoid. I don't know how it does it, but I honestly believe it does. I've heard many people say it's a Communist plot. Of course, I won't go *that* far, but I do hope you'll think your position through again."

He listened carefully as the President spoke to this point. Was there some weakening in his commitment from previous chats?

"But you just can't turn it off, much as I might like to," the President said. "Ever since we discontinued the space program back in 1984, it's been necessary to maintain at least some rallying point, some unifying goal, for the nation. You can't have a nation that you can be proud of if it's not pulling together. There are anarchists out there, Dr. Hamberger, waiting to pounce. Furthermore, it consumes a tremendous amount of technical manpower. Where am I to put these unemployable, overtrained eggheads otherwise? I don't doubt your *own* sincerity, Dr. Hamberger, but I wish you'd try to see my points. Help me, please, to deal severely with the misguided people who contend that it's producing hallucinogens as atmospheric pollutants. You know that is just not true. Some of these bums even say it is changing the fundamental nature of the universe in the immediate vicinity of Denver, if you want to believe those examples they cite of the so-called natural laws, out there, sometimes being violated. And particularly dangerous, Dr. Hamberger, are the people who keep saying that it's causing all the problems in this society and that all we need to do is to turn off the Reality Machine and spend the money somewhere else. To the contrary, any money that doesn't go into the Reality Machine is money that's wasted, but they don't see that, that there's *bound* to be technological fall-out that will just have to justify the costs many, many times over! I've told the American people I don't know how many times that I believe this with unalterable conviction. This is my belief, I believe it with all my heart and soul. I have information from—well, maybe you'll think this is a little far out, Dr. Hamberger, but God talks to me sometimes, he really does."

Dr. Hamberger was not overly discouraged. The President's position at least had not hardened appreciably since the last discussion. He mused, while the President concluded, that perhaps now would be a good time to lay the other matter out on the table in the open, for comment.

His problem was this. The

President was, of course, right in thinking that money was not necessarily the answer to all the problems facing the country. Take Crime in the Streets, which had been with us as a political issue for forty years, now. There was a simple explanation for it. A small segment of mankind was born insane because of a peculiar genetic deficiency that could be detected quite easily by blood tests at the age of five. By isolating these children in special camps, we would escape their malignant influences subsequently. This perfectly straightforward, scientific proposal was dispatched to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Institute of Mental Health, by the President with his warm and enthusiastic endorsement.

Then, alas, some paranoid Negro Under-Secretary of Something-or-other had leaked the proposal to the press, doubtless with good intentions, thinking perhaps that it had originated with the Department of Justice and was aimed uniquely at the black citizens.

Negroes were too sensitive. Nothing in American history suggested tendencies to support genocide, nor could anyone point to a single instance of it. The trouble with Negroes was that they were paranoid, and doubtless this could be traced to some defective gene, somewhere, rather than, as some suggested, to a breakdown of the family unit. Economic conditions, indeed! The blacks have never had a sense of the family unit, even back in the days of so-called slavery. It would be a thing to look into, later, but for the moment, the proposal was merely to isolate the criminal element. We could weed out all these deficient individuals in a single generation, and thereafter, America, purged of its troublemaking elements, would no longer be troubled with its age-old problems. The cost of the program would be nominal.

The scientific community pretended not to accept this theory, although, of course, they must know it to be true. Dr. Hamberger could cite at least sixteen articles from reputable medical and biological journals during the last twenty years that conclusively demonstrated the correctness of it. Even discounting the studies with fruit flies, that left six articles dealing with white rats *and* hamsters. Their refusal to accept the irrefutable facts must conclusively indicate, no, demonstrate! the existence of an evil conspiracy. Who were its members? One did not need to look far to find them! There was a cabal in the Administration who would like nothing better than to discredit him in the President's eyes because of his opposition to the Reality Machine. It was a conspiracy of the Scientific/Industrial Complex.

The President, who had been dressing in drag for the last sev-

eral weeks, now had closed his eyes and was talking about his childhood. This continued until, at the end of some twenty minutes, and just before his hour was up, the Secretary of the Interior, dressed as Napoleon, and who, Dr. Hamberger knew for a fact, was the reincarnation of Joan of Arc, burst unannounced into the room, to cry excitedly, "Denver, Colorado, has just vanished from the face of the earth! Have you heard the news yet?"

The President sat up instantly. "That's marvelous!" he exclaimed. "Really marvelous news! We're starting to get some concrete results out of the Reality Machine. I told you, Hamberger, I told you!"

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The Callonians were not in good shape. They were a ritualistic, formal race on an alien planet, and they were dying. Jalas was supposed to be a healer, but he was powerless. And then he began a deadly exile, like other healers before him . . .

THE RUN FROM HOME

by Joe L. Hensley

Some races make it to adulthood despite bad luck. Take the Callonians, for example. In a remarkably short time they managed to plunder the ground and pollute the atmosphere of a fairly pleasant home planet. At about the time that this became a problem, a bright Callonian scientist figured correctly that their sun would nova in 5.6 of their years. Panic took command.

Seven ships got off in time. Of the seven that got away four landed on barren worlds and so perished. One, in the third or fourth generation, fell into cannibalism and had a high time until the survivors ate themselves to death. Another blundered into a system where an interplanetary war was in progress and became nuclear dust, tallied as "total destruction of dastardly sneak attack" by both *sides.*

The last landed, after torturous generations of travel, on a suitable world. A war aboard the ship generations back had decimated their numbers and depleted their supplies. The resultant society was ritualistic and formalized. The ship was almost destroyed in the landing. Its people had lost their desire to do more than live by rules set down by their fathers.

The people began to die.

Jalas knew, when they came murmuring in frustration outside the hut, that he was lost. They were going to put him outside the walls they'd built two generations ago. That would be the end of living for him. They'd then pick another for healer, and that new one

too would last only a short time.

He touched the sick one on the pallet. The fever was rising quickly now, and the blackness had spread deep down in the eyes when he shined the torchlight into them. It wouldn't be long. Perhaps there'd be a companion to make the dread journey to the sun of home. Or maybe that journey was only myth, another of the things that had been impressed on him as "right" and which many times seemed only foolish.

"Come out, Jalas," voices called.

He went out into the daylight and stood there stolidly waiting for them.

"We have chosen another for healer," the one Jalas knew as Kedrin said. "We have decided you have no power. The people die."

Jalas nodded. Kedrin was one of the ones you could talk to, reason with. "I told you they would when you deposed Seymart, the last healer. If you'll give me more time for puzzling over the old books and some assistants to help me try to reactivate the machinery we saved from the ship, then perhaps something can be done."

"Your time has run," Kedrin said morosely, looking away. "It is the custom."

"And who then will be the next healer?" Jalas asked.

Kedrin's eyes were unhappy. "I will."

"Long and happy life," Jalas said, not without irony. "The cold months will come again. Perhaps they will bring respite."

They stared at each other without rancor.

"You may take your waterbag with you to the walls," Kedrin said.

It was a concession. Jalas nodded and hastened back into the hut and got the bag. He shook it. It was almost full—enough for a time. It would delay death.

They took him quickly to the opening in the wall and forced him through it. Even as he was going through he saw one more fall, one who'd lagged in the background. He heard the wailing from those around the fallen one. He stopped, waiting to see what would happen, but Kedrin gave a perfunctory command and he was pushed on through and into the alien jungle on the far side of the wall. He stood there on the outside and listened to them make the opening fast again.

Jalas had puzzled over the books, but they were incomplete. He had begun to understand some things, but not yet nearly enough. There had been machines in the healer's part of the ship. If those machines could be understood, made to work, then perhaps they could live without disease again. He'd tried his hand at tinkering with the machines. He'd had no

success. They seemed to fall apart under his fingers, fall apart with a decay more ancient than remembered time, recorded life.

Jalas peered around himself, up from his reverie. It was late afternoon. Jalas could tell by the bright, alien sun that there was only a little time until darkness. He moved away from the wall his ancestors had raised against the dreaded swamp jungle. Atop the wall there were some watchers. Jalas waved at them with bravado, but none waved back. He was already thirsty and so he drank sparingly of the water purified over the fires, the only safe water. They were still watching from the walls and the sight was irritating to him now, so he moved behind trees until the village was lost from sight. Then he stopped and considered.

The gray death that had decimated his race since arrival here wasn't a pleasant way of dying, as Jalas well knew. His race wasn't really supposed to be on this planet. The story that you heard from the few old ones who'd survived was that the ship had faltered and a landing place had been needed. *Here* was now home for no one had ever come searching for them offering succor, although some elders still watched the skies with hope.

This world was deadly and fruitful. Anything put in the dark, moist soil grew. There was food, plentiful food. The colony should have prospered, but it had remained behind the walls and—died. The two thousand or so were now four hundred odd, and this last summer had been very bad. The people had now changed healers for the third time, a thing unheard of.

You could see what was killing the people. You could see the parasites in the water with the glass that blew them up to fearsome size. There were many kinds. Jalas had examined the dead of his race, despite the taboos against it. The symptoms were the same, but the type of parasite causing the disease varied from case to case. You could see those various parasites and a hundred others on the food that came bursting up from the fertile ground. And no matter how much care you took you ingested some of those parasites, breathed others. Then, but only sometimes, the gray death came. You could live for years carefully eating and drinking only the purest things, twice sterilized, blessed by the priests. Then one day the patches of gray that grew in the moist and secret parts of the body would go wild, and you would die quickly, burning with unquenched fever.

Jalas had seen his mother and father die that way. He'd seen so many others die in his recent time as healer that he was sick of the sight and smell of death.

He looked up again at the sky. He was still on a high spot and the land was only moist. Down below the land fell into swamp. There were many things that roamed the swampland. Jalas had observed those things from the top of the walls. His own race wasn't carnivorous, and so they'd left the meat eaters of the swamp in peace, but Jalas realized that many of the swamp creatures would gladly hunt and feed on him.

The sun had fallen further and Jalas sought the highest tree he could find. He scrambled halfway up into it and wedged himself into an uncomfortable crotch.

He had figured a course of action. By legend there were creatures in the swamp with some intelligence. The stories had it that those creatures had once come to the walls and attempted curious contact. Jalas' race had driven them away. Jalas had read the writings of the first generation. It hadn't been right to drive those creatures away, to refuse contact. Perhaps help could have come from them. He shivered a little. *Perhaps not.*

Tomorrow would be time enough to begin looking. He drank sparingly of his water and then dozed restlessly through the night, coming awake at the many sounds, starting when one of the three moons darted across the sky.

It was the longest night of his life.

In the morning things seemed better. He was almost optimistic when he came cautiously down from his tree. He searched among the trees and vines near the edge of the swamp until he found one that had edible berries. He had a morning meal on those, knowing they should be cooked for safety's sake, but having no fire and no way to start one. He knew that many of his race would have died of starvation before violating the strict rules of eating without blessing and purification.

He took stock of his possessions. He had his long knife, his waterbag, and his pocket surgeon's kit. In one of the pouches of the belt he wore he found another useful thing. It was a sharp, pointed tool that he'd used to work on the machines inside the moldering spacecraft. He cut a stout pole with the knife and fastened the tool firmly to the lesser end of the pole with vines. It made a formidable-appearing weapon, and he practiced with it for a few moments, thrusting in and out, dodging and feinting. His confidence became even more restored.

He made his way farther into the brightly hued swamp. Here trees and vines and plants grew in chaotic profusion. The only safe way seemed to be up into the huge trees. Some of them seemed to reach halfway to the sun. He went up and followed a main branch to where it intersected a branch of

an adjoining tree. He made his way on carefully, feet sinking slightly in the soft bark covering the harder core.

When the sun was high he ate from another tree that bore edible fruit, throwing the leftovers into the water below. He heard the splash when they struck and then a louder, furious sound. He parted the leaves and got a view of the water below. Two enormous fish fought for the remains of the fruit Jalas had dropped, turning the water into white froth over food that wouldn't feed either one.

Jalas shuddered. Here, life was like that, savage and cruel. The swamp below teemed with swimming, fighting death.

He remembered something he'd thought on before. He'd spent day after interminable day on the wall watching, trying to understand the myriad lifeforms, trying to fit them into categories. Yet he'd never seen a sign of disease in any of the lifeforms. He had, however, seen the ever-present gray patches on some of the animals. But if they died from those patches, he'd never been an observer to that death.

Perhaps it wasn't death that lay outside. Perhaps it was life. That was a good thing to believe.

The old account of his race and their meeting with the intelligent swamp creatures had named those creatures *Quas*. He remembered the report vividly: *"They seem to congregate together, discussing us and the wall we are building. They don't appear to be things of menace, although there are many things here that are dangerous. They are only bright and interested and eternally in the way when we worship and purify. They speak together in some quick tongue. They seem equally at home in water or on land. There is a sort of rough beauty to them, but the Chairman and the Priests have called a meeting about them tonight and will lay down an edict and a place in the ritual concerning them. Someone, it is reported, has spied them eating other living things from the water. Perhaps it is because we fear meat eaters because once we ate meat and lost our sun, or perhaps we fear that they might eat us . . ."*

That afternoon he was attacked. It was a large bird, with a wingspan at least three times as wide as Jalas was tall. The tree saved him and impeded him at the same time. He failed to hear the rush of wings until almost too late. When he saw what was upon him, he almost fell from the wide tree limb in panic. He'd never been hunted before. He ran down the limb and tripped over a small branch. He fell, but managed to hang onto the limb and there heard the heavy wings pass narrowly over and fade. He opened his eyes and scrambled further

and further into the more densely branched area where the huge bird would have difficulty following. He had recovered a part of his nerve, and he took the knife in one hand and the spear in the other and entwined his legs into the thick latticework of branches. The huge bird landed far out on the branch and hopped awkwardly and warily down toward him. Jalas waited until the creature was close and then swung the long spear at the eyes of the creature. He knew more by feel than sight that he'd struck home. The bird eyed him malevolently and dripped blood from its wound onto the branch. Jalas gestured menacingly with the spear. The bird flew off, seemingly in a poor humor.

"I wasn't your dinner," Jalas cried after it in exultation. He wondered how long it had been since some member of his race had fought another creature. At the same time he resolved to keep more careful watch.

He got his chance with a Qua two days later. Those days had been tiring and difficult in the deeps of the swamp. He'd been sparing with the water, making it last, but there was only a little left, and he was now constantly thirsty.

Jalas heard the distant screams. Some creature was either in pain or cried out for help. He paused, undecided. Then he made toward the sound.

Two of the huge birds such as the one that had attacked him had caught a Qua robbing eggs from their nest. The evidence was apparent. The eggs lay at the base of the nest tree. The birds had trapped the Qua, for the tree was on higher ground and the Qua was caught there, unable to flee the birds. The birds were cackling angrily and the Qua whirled a sling menacingly as the birds closed.

Jalas dropped into the scene without warning. His spear caught the bird on the right as he dropped from the lowest branch of the nest tree. He pushed the spear in deep, then had to step aside to avoid the thrusting beak. The spear hung in the wound, and in the thrashing of the stricken bird, Jalas lost his grasp on it. He saw the Qua give him one quizzical look, and he heard something buzz through the air toward the other bird. His own pursued him into the tangled roots of the tree, and Jalas was hard pressed to avoid it. Then the creature gave one final squawk, pecked at itself, and died. Jalas rescued his spear, fought off dizziness, and turned again toward the theater of action.

All was quiet. The other bird moved feebly. As Jalas watched, the Qua loosed another missile from his sling and the bird quieted.

Jalas smiled at the Qua and was rewarded by an answering smile. They watched each other alertly.

The Qua had bulging eyes and was shorter than Jalas. The feet were lightly webbed, but the upper extremities were without webbing, the three-fingered hands blunt and powerful. When the creature lifted its heavy arms, Jalas could see the gray fungus he associated with the disease he feared.

He said earnestly to the creature, smiling all of the time, "Like it or not, I'm going to follow you. I haven't any usable water left. Perhaps where you live there's a fire or a method of starting one."

He was rewarded by a burst of staccato, monosyllabic sounds. He shook his head indicating ignorance.

The Qua picked his way over roots and to the water, watching Jalas. Jalas followed carefully. The creature entered the water and Jalas shook his head in negation.

"I'm afraid to come there," he said softly, with dread. "That water alone might kill me—just being in it."

And so the Qua swam carefully, turning now and again to keep Jalas in sight.

Jalas could see nothing coming near where the Qua swam, no attackers. His curiosity was even more aroused at the sight.

More than anything he was thirsty.

In a short time they found *home.*

The village was built into the tangled roots of the trees. The huts were of boughs and vines, covered with leaves and swamp mud.

Hundreds of Quas sported playfully in the nearby waters. They fell into silence at the sight of Jalas, and then the air became clouded with the many voices raised in that querulous, monosyllabic sound.

There was, thank the God of Suns, a fire.

In a short period he was at home. The newness had worn away from him for the Quas. No longer was he followed, touched, watched curiously. He could roam the village or go out of it without a second glance. And, blessedly, he could use the fire to boil water in a borrowed clay pot.

He had proved of worth to the tribe almost immediately. On the second day after his coming, the home pool had been invaded by a huge, maddened fish. Normally no fish came within the pools around the Qua village, but this one had come with a sort of insanity. It had raced at the swimmers and had slashed one Qua, who was too confident. Somehow Jalas had persuaded the Quas to carry the wounded one, deeply cut on head

and neck, into Jalas' hut. He'd sutured the cut carefully, using his surgical kit. It was only emergency medicine to stop the spouting loss of blood. A few of the Quas who'd carried the injured one had watched him do the job. Their faces had revealed nothing more than curious interest. Jalas thought that normally the procedure was probably to let the injured one live or die as nature dictated.

When he'd finished they carried the injured one away, and Jalas presumed that chances of survival were remote. He was mistaken, for the Qua mended quickly, tough, leathery hide knitting together more quickly than was medically right.

Now they were all coming to him for emergency repairs. He closed up their wounds and splinted the bones they broke in hunting the huge fish the tribe craved. And all of the wounds closed beautifully and the bones started to knit perfectly and quickly. Jalas knew a little about sterile fields, and most of his surgery for his own race had been done with at least an attempt towards a sterile field. Here, in the swamp, it didn't seem to matter.

Attentively, seeking clues to the gray death, he watched the Quas at their daily routines. They ate the huge swamp fish raw, and that was the largest part of their diet. They also ate eggs robbed from nests. They ate herbs and plants that grew in the swamp, and they ate the fruit from many of the trees. Jalas sampled it all, except the fish flesh, gingerly testing. Each time, because of the belief deep within him, because of the rituals that had been a part of his living, he boiled all.

The Quas drank water directly from the swamp. Jalas knew that the water was abundant with parasites, millions to the drop. His own water he continued to boil carefully over the village fire that was used normally for the cooking of succulent herbs.

And then one day the waiting seemed over. He awoke feeling strangely. He lifted his arms and looked down. The patches had grown, overnight, into the grim, gray forests of the disease.

It had now been many days since he'd been ejected from the wall. He sat for a while in the hut the Quas had given him thinking about it. He could die here or he could make a desperate attempt to get back to the wall. If he couldn't gain entrance, at least he could die near his own kind. A part deep within him, steeped with a hundred stories and a thousand rituals, called for that latter choice.

He went out into the lightly falling rain. The Quas played uselessly in the water off the end roots. They surfaced and lay

quiescently in the water, then dived quickly under, only to surface again far away. Their movements in the water were agile and beautiful. Although they'd now evolved into air breathers, they still seemed more at home in the water.

Jalas watched them wistfully.

Now the hours went by swiftly. The Quas had been of no help. After all, how could they be? They knew nothing of his need, nothing of the disease. They'd looked at the gray fungus, touched it curiously, discussed it together, then turned away without expression.

The time came soon when he was too sick to arise, when the blackness came into his eyes. His head seemed one vast, sounding trumpet. He tried to stagger from his hut, for he was extremely thirsty, but his legs wouldn't bring him up. He lay there suffering from the thirst.

Some of the Quas came near and watched him. He beckoned to one of them and pulled the empty waterbag from beneath his pallet. He'd never wanted a drink so badly. He suspected he was the first of his race who'd ever wanted unclean water. He pointed to the water outside and the Qua took the bag from his now limp hands. He blacked out momentarily. When he came to awareness again, the Qua was holding the bag to Jalas' mouth, and he was drinking great gulps of the warm, swamp wetness.

He turned his head away weakly and tried to let the darkness come again. There should now certainly be enough of the killer parasites within him to kill quickly. He waited. All that whole day he waited.

In the morning he was still waiting. He slept easily and was able to get up the following morning and stagger about weakly. In another day the great, gray patches were almost gone, back down to near normalcy.

Jalas came to the wall prepared to beat on the door to gain audience. It wasn't necessary. The people were about to eject Kedrin, who'd taken Jalas' place as healer.

The gate was open and there was the sound of an argument that appeared of long standing. Kedrin stood, head bowed, near the gate. His detractors stood on one side and those for him on the other.

Jalas moved in close and was seen. Many had gone into the swamps as exiles before. None had ever come out.

"Lord of the sun," Kedrin said softly and in awe.

Jalas stepped through the gate. He remembered the days of ritual and calculated. "I live," he said. Then the lie came easily to his lips, the lie that was to save his race: "The Gods came to me in

the swamp. They gave me the cure for the gray disease."

They watched him without real belief. Many seemed ill.

"I have the potion here," Jalas said, shaking his waterbag. "I have had the gray death and lived because our Gods decreed it. Each of you who are ill will drink from this bag. If the potion is used up, I will fetch more from where I've secreted it."

They watched him and for a dreadful moment he was unsure as to whether they were going to believe him or fall on him for his blasphemy.

One of the most obviously ill staggered to him and took the bag and drank from it in great gulps, and the moment of danger was past.

He stayed with them for many days. He confided the secret to Kedrin, who was ripe for it.

"I think what happens when we continue to drink the purified water and eat the purified food is that somehow we allow one parasite, one particular one, to take control. With no influx of new invaders, that parasite establishes numerical superiority over all of the others and begins to kill the survivors off, then tries to change the envirnment of our bodies into something more usable for itself. So we die. When you have the condition and you drink the swamp water raw, then you send whole troops of new parasites into the body and restart the fight for supremacy."

Kedrin nodded. "So very many have died because we live behind these walls and spend too much of our time in remembering the past instead of making the future."

"Yes," Jalas said.

Kedrin watched him. "I have been working on the machines in the ship. I'm not sure they can ever be made to work again. Perhaps though, if the two of us . . ."

Jalas thought about it. Outside he was hailed now as a favorite of the Gods, and the feeling wasn't without sweetness. Finally he shook his head. "It's apparent that this must be our world," he said. "Eventually that wall around us must come down, but our people aren't ready yet." He remembered the Quas' sleek, brown bodies, the curious resiliency, the ability to avoid attack in the swamp paths. To know more would be good and useful. "Until that time comes," he continued, "I think it would be best if I went back into the swamp. There is much to learn out there, and if we are to really live in this world, those things must be learned." He nodded grudgingly. "There is also much to learn here. You will find it. Make them keep the gate open during the days. I will journey back frequently and tell you what I learn, and you will share your knowledge with me."

Kedrin nodded and the bargain was struck. He eyed Jalas with eyes that were so very much like Jalas' own. "There is so very much to know," he said with anticipation.

By the time Jalas died after his full span of years the village was back to several thousand. Jalas had three assistants and on his death bed he called them and told them the Gods bade the walls be torn down. In ten more generations the race had encircled the planet. No one of that race ever harmed a Qua. As a near God, Jalas had made that a part of the ritual. Together, friends, the two races built towards the stars.

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This month's cover by Mel Hunter is available. It is the fourth in a new series of robot covers done especially for F&SF (the previous three were the January, May and September 1970 issues; all are available).

FILMS

Baird Searles

An interesting bit of esoterica on which to report this month; the first Finnish feature film to be released in the U.S., and it's a true science fiction film; that is, it is concerned with more than giant insects or creeping animate sludge. That's a plus factor right there, and there's more to be said for it. Its title is **Time of Roses** (director Risto Jarva), and it was the gold medal winner of the 1969 Trieste Science Fiction Film Festival.

Science fiction films are almost always set in the present day for a perfectly obvious reason; few have the budget to create a world of the future, unless it is a bargain basement return to barbarism. *Time of Roses* is one of the very few films that succeeds in establishing a future milieu on what was obviously a small budget. Advantage was taken of the sometimes startling Scandanavian architecture; costumes are understated, but unfamiliar (and not all the same, a futuristic cliche), and most of the artifacts are convincing. I say most, since there are a couple of gaffes; the hero, for instance, seems to be a collector of antique inflatable furniture of the late '60s and also tends to use a great deal of antiquated Sony electronic equipment. For all I know, Sony radios are real exotica to the Finns, but they rang false to a consumer American. The most convincing notes are social, particularly social dancing, several varieties of which are shown in a tavern setting. One type uses the hands primarily, and a variation is depicted at a drug party given by the hero, where all the guests are lying around on the inflatable furniture, languidly dancing with their hands.

There's a good plot twist, too. The protagonist is a maker of video documentaries, currently making a reconstruction of an "average" life of the 1960s, in this case a none too successful model. This gives play to some interesting views of the current scene from a "future" viewpoint. The plot itself concerns the subtle manipulation of this material to maintain the status quo, and the unsuccessful attempt of some of those involved to prevent this; i.e., a very small scale revolution against a non-malignant, but manipulative, power structure.

All in all, nicely done, unpretentious, and uncondescending. I hope the vagaries of film distribution do not limit this film to just a few urban centers.

Roger Corman's film of H. P. Lovecraft's **The Dunwich Horror** arrived in my neck of the woods after playing every drive-in in the

country, but it is still worthy of some late comment. It has surprising moments of faithfulness to the original, and the basic situation is the same (what is the story but a revelation of the situation?), obviously meant as a cash-in on *Rosemary's Baby*. What mucks the whole thing up is the addition of a plot, embodied in Sandra Dee as Wilbur Whateley's girlfriend. As anyone who knows Lovecraft's work can well imagine, this throws the whole thing into dimensions undreamed of by HPL. A classic moment comes in the very first scene where, in some Grove of Academe (Miskatonic U.?), a professorial Ed Begley turns to Miss Dee, and handing her a weighty volume, says, "Take the Necronomicon and put it back in the library." Dean Stockwell, as Wilbur, is entirely too well bred; the subtler horror of the story is the nastiness of the debased Whately clan. Wilbur's dimension crossed brother is cleverly evoked by sounds, an invisible presence, and some color negative work (influences of *2001 and Forbidden Planet* discernible). Another delicious moment that must be mentioned is the final ceremony to summon the Old Ones, which is conducted over Miss Dee's chiffon clad body. There are many shots of her quivering flanks, and at the climactic moment, Wilbur props the Necronomicon in her crotch, presumably for easier reading. Horrifying? Yes, indeed.

Things-to-come Dept . . . Anthony Burgess' sociological s-f novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, is in production directed by Stanley Kubrick, and the film version of Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* is in the writing stage.

Coming next month

Next month's feature story is THE HUMAN OPERATORS, a new novelet by **Harlan Ellison** and **A. E. Van Vogt.** It's an unusually inventive and gripping story, about a fleet of space ships that mysteriously "operates" the crews. Also, an offbeat ghost story by **Gary Jennings**, plus stories by **Doris Pitkin Buck, Leonard Tushnet** and others. The January issue is on sale December 1.

This new Ben Jolson adventure takes the Chameleon Corps agent to the planet Jaspar in search of the leader of an army of rebel young people, a mission that involves Jolson in a number of strange roles (e.g., a member of a therapy group that includes a lemon-yellow dwarf, a lizard man, and an android). Ron Goulart's most recent novels are AFTER THINGS FELL APART *and* THE FIRE-EATER *(Ace). A collection of his stories (many of which appeared first in these pages) has just been published by Macmillan under the title* BROKE DOWN ENGINE.

SUNFLOWER

by Ron Goulart

THE CHILDREN CAME RUNNING across the table top toward the official car, bent low and zigzagging to avoid the blaster rifles that were starting to crackle. Plain-tuniced guards dropped from the running board of the intensely black landcar and trotted toward the oncoming kids, firing pistols into them. Only one young boy survived to reach the car carrying the Deputy Territorial Governor. The boy left the cobble roadway, threw himself toward the dome over the scrambling deputy governor. The boy, about sixteen, lean and light haired, hit the protective car dome spread-eagle. At that instant he exploded and took the official car with him. Black metal, clear vinyl, flesh and bone erupted and flowered above the spot in the parade where the official car had been forced to halt.

"Once again?" asked the chubby, partly metal man on the far side of the table. His metal hand rested on the rewind button of the triop projector.

"Three times is plenty," said Ben Jolson. He was a lean, slightly slouching man in his mid-thirties. Outside the bow windows hundreds of straight green trees rose up.

"Did you get a good look at that seventeen-year-old blonde girl?" asked Clinton Wheeler-Woolsey. He pointed at the now empty top of the carved coffee table with his real forefinger. "She came strutting right along here, took out three of the Jaspar Provisional Government Army troopers when

she exploded. Such a nice little ass on her. What a shame."

Jolson left the pin-stripe love seat and turned his back on Wheeler-Woolsey. The trees were full of blue squirrels. "Why do you want another Chameleon Corps man here on Jaspar?"

"This briefing is intended to explain all that, Jolson," said the Political Espionage Office field man. "Sit back down and pay attention."

Facing the plump espionage agent, Jolson said, "Get to my assignment then."

Wheeler-Woolsey snatched up a triop spool from atop an upright piano, using his fine metal fingers. "I bet you have it in for me because I'm a cyborg, part machine."

"No, Clinton, I have it in for you because you got PEO to spaceship me out here from Barnum to spend half a day with you in your portable office watching atrocity movies."

Wheeler-Woolsey jammed the new spool into the silver-plated projector. "You'll see how handy an office you can drive around is. I may just save your bacon in the field someday," he said. "Anyhow, I don't see where you get off criticizing me for liking to watch that pretty little Suicide Kid. I hear you had an affair with one of our best lady PEO agents."

"Former agent." Jolson clenched one bony hand and moved toward the plump man.

Wheeler-Woolsey jumped back, unscrewing his metal hand. He snatched a different one from a clutter of them on top of the piano. "Stay back, Jolson. This new hand is a stun-gun aersol."

Jolson kept coming. "Oh, so?"

The PEO man cried, "I warned you." He pushed at a blue rise on the new hand. The hand whirred, rose up, and pulled him with it to the piano where it began playing the bass part of *The Maple Leaf Rag*. "Oh, you. Put on my piano-playing hand by mistake. Well, look smug now, Jolson. Sooner or later all you tricky Chameleon Corps boys come to dust."

Jolson grinned a quiet grin and flicked on the triop. "Who do you want impersonated, Clinton?"

Following the motion of his piano-playing hand with bobbing head, Wheeler-Woolsey said, "Several people, probably. You'll see one there in a sec." He turned off the hand, hesitated over which one to screw on next.

"No more weapons," suggested Jolson. "Let's get on with the briefing." The three-dimensional image of a rundown pub formed midway on the table. The ornate wooden doors of the pub ripped open and a big rumpled man dressed in several shades of tweed came out backwards. He trundled, flapping for balance, fell flat on his back in an oily gutter.

"Hold it there."

Jolson touched the freeze button and the rumpled man stayed

on the table top, still and wide spread. "Who is he?"

Wheeler-Woolsey finally chose a hand wearing a white grout-skin glove. "His name is Mig O'Bunyan. Heard of him back on Barnum?"

"Poet, isn't he?" Jolson bent closer and studied the miniature man.

"Political poet, yes. I'll sleep-brief you on him and his works. He's very prolific and fond of self-quotes."

"Where is he now?"

"We have him at an alcoholics hospital run by Seventh-Day Adventist robots way out in no place. There will be no trouble about your using his identity for a few days." The plump agent reached a file folder off a knickknack shelf.

"Why Mig O'Bunyan?"

"I'll explain. We've got a big mess here on Jaspar. Or maybe it's several little messes. Myself, I favor the one-big-mess theory. I'll explain."

Jolson caught the file the PEO man tossed him. "I've heard about the Suicide Kids. What else?"

"This planet Jaspar is composed chiefly of five territories," said Wheeler-Woolsey. "All run from here, from Oldcastle Territory. There's a lot of light industry in the territories, considerable agriculture, pretty good fishing trade. There are quite a few of these theme-suburbs around and about. You know, where the residents decide to live around a motif; South Seas, Martian ruins, Old West, etc. The Provisional Government is, well, Jolson, it isn't the kind of government Barnum would like to see here. Even though we control the planets in the Barnum System, we don't want, for various reasons, to oppose the Jaspar government at this time." He rubbed his stomach with his gloved metal hand. "Tyranny and oppression have degrees. The Provisional Government isn't as bad as it could be. Certainly there's a lot of suppression of truth, arbitrary jailing, even a goodly number of political executions. And the army rides around on horseback a lot and tramples things. All this has led to a sort of growing resentment among the people on Jaspar. The young folks in particular are getting increasingly unhappy. These Suicide Kids, to take one example, obviously aren't happy."

"I'd noticed," said Jolson. "How many of them have killed themselves this way?"

"God, it's gone over the hundred mark," said the PEO agent. "A hundred that we've verified. Nearly thirty public officials have been assassinated by Suicide Kids in the last six months and twice that number hurt. There may be many more explosions they've caused that we simply aren't sure about." His artificial hand rubbed his chin. "We suspect, Jolson, that there may be hundreds of kids

joining the Suicide Kid movement. At least, a lot of young people in the teen years and early twenties are wandering off."

Jolson had opened the file folder. "Who's recruiting the young people?"

"We don't know for sure. You're aware that Jaspar may be the oldest civilized planet in the Barnum System? Yes. Before Barnum ever colonized Jaspar there might have been great cities here. One or two of these ancient cities may still exist out in the wilds somewhere. It's possible that's where Wilbur Daniel Slack has gone."

Jolson closed the folder. "Back on Barnum they told me you guys here had a simple impersonation that should take a week at most to clear up. Now I've been here almost a day and I don't even know what the problem is."

"It's complicated." Wheeler-Woolsey pointed at his gloved thumb. "One, the Suicide Kids are a growing threat to the stability of the Jaspar government. Not to mention that a fad like this could well spread to other planets if it's not checked. Two, a professor from this territory's largest university has vanished and is believed to be organizing an army of rebel young people. His name is Wilbur Daniel Slack, but the kids seem to call him Sunflower."

"Why?"

"We don't, as yet, know that either." The PEO man stroked the hollow between two fingers. "Wilbur Daniel Slack was the head of the Cyborg Research Department at Oldcastle Territory University. He was working on an explosive device which can be easily implanted in enemy casualties on a battlefield. A device that can be detonated directly or by remote control. It turns them into booby traps, human bombs."

"That's what these Suicide Kids use?"

"Right, Jolson. Or something damned similar, according to our analysis of remains and fragments," said Wheeler-Woolsey. "We think Sunflower has gone berserk and is raising a multitude of young assassins to overrun Jaspar. Eventually he might try to upset the whole Barnum System."

Jolson said, "You've already had one Chameleon Corps agent out here for a month working on this. What's he found out?"

Wheeler-Woolsey touched his middle finger. "Three, Chameleon Corps Major Eduardo Bronzini hasn't reported to me or any other Political Espionage Office rep for nearly two weeks."

"PEO on Barnum told me there was a lead and Bronzini started on it. What was it?"

"Major Bronzini, and you'd expect a CC man of forty to be able to take care of himself, was sent into the Timbrook Foundation. It's a psychiatric institute in a suburb

near here. We believe someone in there is working with Sunflower, is acting as an informant for him and the Suicide Kids. A lot of government people go there for therapy. In fact, key people from all over."

"I've heard of the place. Who was Bronzini posing as?"

"An aging actress named Dolly Louise Huffacker."

"That's right," said Jolson. "Bronzini likes to work in drag."

"Since he has the ability to change into anyone, the major sees no reason to limit his impersonations to the male sex."

Jolson shrugged again. "So you want me to go into Timbrook as Mig O'Bunyan?"

"Exactly. He's in the same therapy group that Bronzini infiltrated."

"But you want more than news about Bronzini."

Wheeler-Wolsey replied, "Even if you can't locate the major, Jolson, please try to find out where Sunflower has his stronghold and what's behind the Sunflower business, the Suicide Kids, the whole mess. You are authorizel to follow up any leads you uncover, though I hope you'll check in with me when you can."

"Do you know whom Bronzini was watching at the foundation?"

"We don't. He was sent in to nose around, listen."

Jolson nodded. "Okay."

"You'll do your best, won't you? Even though you don't much like me."

"Sure," grinned Jolson. "Want to shake on it?"

"Wait till I change my hand," said Wheeler-Woolsey.

"I feel like a new man," said the lemon-yellow dwarf.

"Oh, for goodness sake," sighed the brownish lizard man in the check suit, "here we go again."

The oval room was big and dim, with six imitation fireplaces spaced evenly around it. There were thick brown rugs on the floor, round, oval, octagonal, all with barely perceptible floral patterns. Ball lamps glowed on small marble-topped tables.

"Perhaps," said Dr. Timbrook, the therapist, "Deemler can tell us why he feels like a new man." He was tall and shaggy, wearing an eight-button white suit.

"Skip it," said the dwarf. "He spoiled it all."

"Honestly," said the lizard man. "I'm dreadfully tired of hearing about you and your midget lady friend week after week."

"I'd like," put in Jolson as he lit a vegetable-base cigar, "to ask you, Burrwick, to shut up and let this bairn speak his piece." Jolson was now Mig O'Bunyan, chubby in his too tight blue linen suit. Perspiring, his grey-black hair in small ringlets. Vegetable cigars and marijuana pills in all his pockets, along with manuscripts,

uncashed checks, letters. Jolson had the ability to change shape at will, to impersonate anyone, many things.

The lizard man crossed his legs and snorted. "You and your silly brogue or whatever it is. You don't really have Earth origins. Admit you live in the Barnum system, on Jaspar, you silly poetic nitwit."

"I winna deny my humble origins, ye gritt green limmer."

"Fleshies," said the silver-plated android sitting next to the therapist. He was humanoid in appearance, bright as chrome, wearing a canvas shift and sneakers. "Boy, you fleshies make me laugh for sure."

"Our very own resident *deus ex machina* has spoken," said the lizard man. "All you need, 26X, is an overhaul. I think letting androids into our therapy sessions is a dreadful notion."

"You're nothing but a faggot," replied 26X.

The dwarf said, "All you guys are fairies, except for Mig O'Bunyan. I heard about how he's always balling some broad." He grinned suddenly at the only girl in the room. "Excuse it, miss."

"No, that's okay." She was a lovely blonde, straight and slim. "It's all, you know, grist for the mill."

"Who is this dame, anyhow?" Jolson lit a fresh cigar. "And what happened to that goofy actress bimbo?"

"I'm actually simply sitting in, Mr. O'Bunyan, just this once. My name is Daisy Anne Currier and I'm a journalist."

Jolson scratched at his rumpled head. "Are you the same broad who interviewed me when I won the Murdstone Prize for literature?"

"No," replied the lovely girl, smiling. "Though I must tell you, Mr. O'Bunyan, that you're one of my favorite revolutionary poets."

"See, see," said the dwarf, bobbing on his ottoman, "they all go goofy for that guy."

The slim blonde girl reporter changed ottomans and sat now next to Jolson. "I sense a sexual undertone in most of the talk."

"Ay, miss," he replied. "I hae nae seen it otherwise. Everyone here is honest, and when you're honest you have to talk about sex. It canna be otherwise."

"Could I ask you, Mr. O'Bunyan, if your own poetry has a very strong sexual undercurrent?"

"You bet it does," said Jolson. "You take my recent ode, *On First Looking into the Gilbert & Bennett Nail Factory Strike.* Why, I gie ye my . . ."

"They're not listening to me any more," complained Deemler.

"This upsets you?" asked Timbrook.

"Well, of course it does, you nitwit."

"How come," asked 26X, "old

chubby the poet doesn't recite for us tonight? Is that a breakthrough?"

"What about that, Mig?" the therapist asked Jolson.

"I winna deny I feel gritt changes in myself of late." Jolson exhaled vegetable smoke. "Still I have to admit I was planning to recite a little something to cheer up that old actress broad, Dolly Louise Huffacker. I've carried the thing about for weeks. Where is that old dame anyhow?"

"Let's hear the poem anyway, chubby," said 26X.

"'Tis nae for your tin ears."

"Anyway," said Deemler, "I feel like a new man."

A heavy old man had been sitting all this time in a far corner. He was broad shouldered with short-cut hair and a crisp white mustache. "I'd like to put in a word about now," he said.

"Go ahead, Major General Portola," said Dr. Timbrook.

"I think the problem here is too much talk, not enough action."

"You always say that," said the yellow dwarf.

26X's eyes clicked from the major general to Jolson, then away. "Have you stopped drinking synthetic brandy, Mig?"

"Nae likely," said Jolson. "Ye ken weel, ye dour devil, 'tis a muse to me."

"Um," said the android.

"Nobody has even mentioned my obsession yet," said the lizard man.

"How is it?" asked Deemler.

"Oh, about the same."

"He's obsessed with carving statues," Deemler said across to Daisy Anne. "Of a lizard he's in love with. A girl lizard, I guess."

"Well, of course," said Burrwick. "I've created nineteen of them. Life size in marble."

"You're quite a good sculptor, Burrwick," said Dr. Timbrook.

The lizard man lowered his head. "I suppose."

26X said, "Say, Dr. Timbrook, I've been wondering."

"Yes?"

"I just got to wondering why Dolly Louise Huffacker used to wander so much around the whole Timbrook Foundation here. Is that why she isn't with us any more?"

"No," said the therapist. "I wasn't aware, 26X, that she did. Why did you bring Dolly Louise up?"

"My thought processes aren't like yours."

"Yes, I know."

26X went on. "Yeah, she used to roam through the resident-patient wing and beyond. Ended up sometimes in that old storeroom behind the rec field. Those buildings been there longer than you even, Dr. Timbrook. I wonder why she was interested in those old mental health files."

"And what do you think?"

"Not sure," said 26X. "Except maybe the old girl had a burning curiosity about something in the past."

"I've even had the impulse to make statues twice life size," said the lizard man. "Oh, by the way, I'm moving to the country."

The therapist said, "You've made a decision about it then."

"He had to," said the dwarf. "When he brought in the marble for his twentieth statue, the floor of his flat collapsed. I saw it on the news."

Dr. Timbrook said, "That's all the time for tonight. I'll see you all next week. Good night."

"Maybe I don't feel like a new man after all," said the yellow dwarf.

"Mr. O'Bunyan," asked Daisy Anne, "would you grant me an interview?"

"I canna refuse," said Jolson. "Only a smaik would. I must run a wee errand first. I'll meet you in an hour at Wild Irish Red's Earth Pub, my favorite haunt."

"Oh, lovely," said the girl reporter.

"Ay," replied Jolson. Out in the long, plain brown hall he moved free of the scattering of group-session members, turned down an empty corridor. Using the floor plans he'd been given during his Political Espionage Office sleep-briefing, Jolson headed for the storehouse beyond the recreation area.

When Jolson was three steps short of being two short corridors away from the rec area, he was jumped. He came around a shadowy turn and 26X grabbed him. "I thought so, fleshie," said the bright android. He knocked Jolson to the dark floor with a heavy fist.

Jolson moved his head and small flakes of rust fell on him. He made a yawning inhalation and blinked. A pool of water, rainbowed with oil, lay next to his right hand on the metal floor. He felt now dials and knobs pressing into his back. He was sitting on the floor, propped in a corner. "Faith! If I am na clean bumbaized," he said to 26X, who was seated in a dented metal chair opposite him. "And losing some of my well-known affection for apparatus."

"The smell." 26X tapped his metal nose.

"Beg pardon?"

"You look like Mig O'Bunyan," said the android. "You act like him, talk like him. I imagine you even have his fingerprints and retinal patterns. You Chameleon Corps guys have been fixed to be able to do that. Right? You went wrong on the smell, buddy. I've sat around Mig some long time, weeks and weeks." He touched at his bright nose again. "Originally I was built to be a security guard. I developed too much individuality, and instead of sending me back to the shop, the organization I

worked for allowed me to come here for treatment. A fleshie conceit, but I play along since it allows me to serve our cause much better. You just don't smell like Mig O'Bunyan."

Jolson massaged the back of his neck. "What about the Chameleon Corps agent who came in here before me?"

"Long gone."

"Dead, you mean?"

26X laughed. "Not exactly. See, I was programmed not to lie. It can be a real handicap in dealing with you fleshies."

"Where is he?"

"Someplace else." 26X smoothed his rough tunic. "You, though, will stay here for a while. This here is an abandoned solitary cell. When things modernized, it was abandoned. We're directly under the file rooms, which is why I gave you the hint during the therapy session. To lure you here, you know."

"You're working for whom—Sunflower?"

"Not Sunflower directly, no," replied the android. "I have other reasons for what I do. I'm going to be helpful to you, CC agent. I'm going to tell you that I do odd jobs for a contact in Estruma Territory. Know where it is?"

"Estruma is about two hundred miles west of us," said Jolson, putting his palms on the metal floor. "One of those theme-areas, where the citizens vote for what sort of milieu they want. Right now most of Estruma is cowboys and Indians, based on the Old West of Earth."

"Very good recitation, fleshie." 26X got out of his chair. "Yeah, if you should ever chance to get out to Estruma look up Tim Hootman, who teaches Earth Literature at the college there. If you like me, you'll like Tim." He laughed once more. "Can you guess why I tell you all this secret stuff?"

"Because you plan to kill me."

"Not me exactly, fleshie." He rested one alloy hand on his hip. "No, I'm just going to leave you in this cell. It still works some, though not quite perfect. It's an old machine they've neglected. It's good enough still to keep you here until you starve or something. Soundproof, restraining, therapeutic. You'll have a fine old time."

Jolson pushed himself suddenly up and tackled the anroid. 26X fell back into a dial-filled wall.

"Now, now," spoke the cell in a soothing but raspy voice. "There is nothing to be violent about. Calm down, relax." String quartet music began to play.

Jolson covered the android's face with both hands and slammed his metal head against bulbs of light- and black-ridged dials.

"Can things be so bad?" asked the soothing voice of the cell. "Don't thrash so. Sit down com-

fortably and enjoy yourself. You're listening now to Feuman's Murdstonian Dance #203."

The thick door of the cell made a grinding noise. It then swung inward. A slim blonde girl dived into the room, skidding slightly on the slippery floor. "Hold on, Mr. O'Bunyan." It was the lovely Daisy Anne Currier, and she held a portable diamond-bladed saw in her right hand.

"Why are we speaking in so many different voices?" asked the old cell. "Identity crisis perhaps. Please sit down and relax, won't you?"

26X rose to his knees. Jolson backed, grabbed the saw from the girl. "Let me," he said.

"I figured there'd be trouble. I got this from my landcar." She was breathing heavily, in gasps.

26X lunged, but an easy chair rose up through the floor before he could reach Jolson, and its back whacked him hard under the chin.

"Try this nice comfortable chair," suggested the room, "while I play a waltz."

Jolson sailed over the fat chair, caught the tottering android, spun him. 26X bounced into the wall, and when he rebounded, Jolson went for his control box with the buzzing diamond saw. In under two minutes he had the android inoperative.

"Calm," said the anxious cell. "Please. I must caution you that I am now forced to introduce a pleasantly scented tranquilizing mist to your environment."

Jolson stepped free of 26X, took Daisy Anne's hand. "I winna forget this." He pulled her and they ran from the cell.

"I'll drop my intense, scatterbrained girl journalist pose if you'll get rid of that brogue or whatever it is," said the girl.

"You're with PEO?"

The girl nodded as they hurried. "26X was talking about Extruma Territory. I overheard. You'll be going there next, won't you?"

"Yes," said Jolson. "And I'll need a new identity for there."

"Clinton Wheeler-Woolsey will have one and he can sleepbrief you with Estruma data."

"Tomorrow I'll go see him."

"What about tonight?"

"Tonight we're going to Wild Irish Red's Earth Pub."

Jolson said, "Whoa," to his grout. The animal discontinued galloping, trotted, stopped in front of the Holy Grail Saloon. Swinging out of the saddle, Jolson tethered his brandy-colored mount to a hitching rail and glanced around him. Stonyville, the county seat of Estruma Territory, was a hot, dusty little town. All laid out in straight lines, eight blocks square and false fronted. Men, horses, cows roamed the flickering streets, and a warm wind sent dirt and

dust and clumps of feathery weed balling through the narrow streets. Stonyville was in the middle of miles of flat, dry country, far from the ragged mountains that made up part of the border between Oldcastle Territory and Estruma Territory.

"What in the hell is that you rode in on?" asked a lean, whiskered man in Old West clothes. He was sitting in a wooden chair in the shade of the Holy Grail's big hand-painted sign.

"A grout," said Jolson. He was now Will Mendoza, wide and weathered. His face broad and dark, his nose looking once-broken and reset. He appeared to be about twenty-six or seven, whimsical, but quick to anger.

"Doggone," said the man, digging at his grizzled whiskers. "It done got six legs on it."

"They all do," said Jolson. "Less you find a sport now and then." He pushed his dusty wide-brimmed black hat up from his brow. "Right now I'm looking for the mayor of Stonyville. I hear as how they're looking for a new sheriff hereabouts."

"They found the old one."

Jolson walked up into the shade. "They did?"

"Yep, I hear tell everybody figured as how the sheriff had beeen bushwhacked out near the university and buried somewheres. But danged if he didn't come riding into town on a borrowed horse a couple hours ago. Fit as a fiddle, said he'd been off on a case."

"Well," said Jolson, "I'm glad for his sake. 'Cept I was figuring to get hired for the job and now it looks like I'm out of work." Jolson decided he shouldn't have spent that extra day with Daisy Anne after his second talk with Wheeler-Woolsey.

"Hey," called a tall, smooth man from the doorway of the saloon, "are you Will Mendoza?"

"Yep, I am."

"I'm Mayor Ridge Morphy. I got your résumé from the telegraph office 'bout an hour ago," said the man. "Come on in here for a spell, Will."

Jolson's grout-riding spurs jangled as he strode through the Holy Grail's swinging doors. Immediately inside the doorway, two burly men with chair-leg clubs jumped him. Jolson pivoted, stretched his left arm a few extra inches and caught the club of the burliest man. He wrenched it away, elbowing the man at the same time in the stomach. Ducking the swing of the other club, Jolson dropped to his knees and used the borrowed club to trip the second attacker. When both men were in half-down positions, he gave each a knockout chop.

Across the big wooden room, from in front of the long bar, a mustached gunslinger called out, "Draw, Mendoza."

Jolson glanced toward the

mayor, who'd taken a chair at one of the saloon's round, bare tables. "Is this intended as an ambush?"

"No, a job interview."

Jolson drew his Old West-style blaster and shot the slower rising pistol from the hand of the gunman at the bar. His shot also took off half the feathers of the stuffed owl over the cash register. Jolson had been sleepbriefed on gunfighting the day before. "What sort of job?" he asked, holstering his weapon and crossing to the mayor's table.

"Sit down," said Mayor Morphy. "You handle yourself pretty good, Will." He held a two-page telegram in his fingers. "Says here in your résumé you cleaned up Suburb #414 on Murdstone three years ago. Cleaned up Western Village on Barnum two years ago. But there's a lapse last year when you didn't clean up anything. How come?"

"I took a year off to travel." Jolson adjusted his black hat and sat in the one empty chair left at the table. "I hear as how you maybe don't need a new sheriff after all."

"Ain't that a laugh," admitted the mayor. He touched a thumb to the fat, curly-haired man seated next to him. "This is our old sheriff, Breezy Balmer. Breezy, this here is Will Mendoza."

"Howdy," said Breezy. "You're a pretty tough jigger."

Jolson said, "Has either one of you fellers got a job to offer me?"

"We do have a position to offer you, Will," said the mayor. "It's a little tougher than being sheriff, which is why we put you to the test just now. I hope you didn't mind us setting three of our toughest waddies onto you."

"Nope. I don't mind shooting somebody now and then and a little violent horseplay. Long as we get, sooner or later, around to talking money."

"Now, what we got in mind, Will," said the mayor, "is for you to become president of Estruma College."

Jolson puckered his mouth, narrowed his eyes. "I didn't come all this way for no desk job."

Breezy Balmer laughed, slapped at his knees with his pudgy hands. "Don't worry about that. There ain't no desk no more."

"Breezy means," said the mayor, "that a few of the students out at Estruma College got playful and burned the former president's office down."

"While he were in it," roared Breezy.

"Don't go on so, Breezy, or you'll give Will the wrong idea." The mayor signaled to a spangled barmaid. "We made a mistake on the last president we hired for the university, Will. We got an academic feller."

"You're of the opinion a gunslinger would be better?"

"You know how kids are these

days," said the mayor. "Course we ain't got nothing like those Suicide Kids that are giving the cities trouble." He knuckled the table top. "Knock wood. But we got a little discord."

Jolson said, "Discord is one thing. I don't hanker to get set on fire."

The mayor assured him. "A feller of the capabilities you just demonstrated, Will, you can handle this little old university."

The barmaid brought three glasses of beer.

"Tell me," said Jolson, reaching his glass nearer, "a little more about the troubles you been having out there."

"First let me explain." The mayor sipped his beer. "Folks in these parts take to our life style right easy, and before long a raucous Old West feel gets hold of most everybody. Life at our university is natural going to reflect this."

"They all wear guns," put in the sheriff.

"Yes, the boys do," said the mayor. "Only a few of our coeds go in for guns."

Jolson persisted. "What are they making trouble about?"

"Well, it's not only that they're fighting each other," said Mayor Morphy. "They're also sort of riled up at most of the faculty.

"Situation boils down to this," said the mayor, waving for another beer. "We got a radical bunch of students and a more conservative bunch of students, plus some in the middle. I'd calculate as how some fifty percent of our riots grow out of showdowns between the liberals and the conservatives."

"It's sort of like cattlemen and sheepherders," said Breezy.

The mayor continued. "Also now and then the Provisional Government sends in troops. I will say they support our life style by sending in only cavalry. Still we don't take kindly to the PG settling our local quarrels."

"Tell him about old MacStone," said the pudgy sheriff.

"Well this MacStone is an oldtimer in these parts. Here before the suburbanites and the commuters. He's a real cattleman. Got himself three thousand acres to the south of the college and been raising grouts for I reckon thirty or forty years. He employs something like two hundred hands out on his spread, and ever danged one is crooked as a snake and mean as a bobcat."

Jolson asked, "And they been raiding the university, too?"

"Exactly," said Mayor Morphy. "Old man MacStone don't like young folks at all, and he hates anybody with more than two dabs of education, and he figures as how the university is actual on his land anyways. He's plumb scornful of local and territorial government."

Jolson raised his hat brim, scratched his weather-worn young chin, spat toward his left boot. "Let me see if I got this straight. You want me to run your college out there, and I got to watch out for wild students and the whole danged Provisional Government and some wildass galoot name of MacStone who got two hundred gunslinging waddies on his payroll. Each and every one of the above-mentioned folks is just plumb crazy about shooting and killing and smashing and burning. Is that about the setup?"

"A pessimistic view, but near true, yep," said the mayor.

Jolson fiddled some more with his hat and his chin. "We ain't talked salary."

"How's $1000 a month sound to you?"

"Make it $1500," said Jolson. "One month in advance right now."

"Well, okay. You come highly recommended. Shake."

They shook hands. "You got yourself a new college president, Mr. Mayor," said Jolson.

"You're right smart," laughed Breezy. "Getting paid in front. At least you'll get to spend some of the cash before they run you out."

Jolson finished his beer, declined a second. "In my wanderings I've heard tell of a jigger named Tim Hootman who's hooked up with your college outfit. Will I meet him out at the campus?" Tim Hootman was the contact 26X had mentioned.

Breezy chortled. "You might even trip over him."

"He means," said the mayor, "that Tim Hootman is the nickname of one of the two teaching machines we got."

"Well, now. He's got quite a reputation, for a machine. I'd still like to have a chat with him."

"Won't do much good," said the mayor. "During one of our most recent shooting matches at the college, he got all shot up by stray gunfire. We ain't had a chance to get him repaired as yet."

"Oh," said Jolson.

Jolson tossed his carpetbag on the brass bed and reached for a coin. "Much obliged."

"Oh, don't tip me," said the bent old man who had showed him to his temporary room at the Faculty Club. "I ain't no bellhop or desk clerk. I'm Sylvan DeBrunnis, PhD, head of the Theology Department. Some of that Liberal Bunch shot up my classroom, and I'm earning a little grub money here at the Faculty Club till tempers cool some."

"I hear tell about some controversy on the campus," said Jolson, taking off his black sombrero and burnishing its brim with his wrist. "Is it of a religious nature?"

"It's more an ideological fracas. See, the Liberal Bunch comprises

about twenty-five percent of the student body. They're led by a big galoot name of Big Bob Oldenberg. They got a list of complaints longer than your right arm. Chief one is they want more Western Studies courses and they want rodeo riding and bulldogging to give credit toward a degree."

Jolson sat in the one wicker chair and rested his booted feet up on the bed. "How's the administration feel about that?"

The old man giggled. "That's you, President Mendoza. It's up to you, see?"

"What I mean," said Jolson, "is I don't fancy getting shot or set on fire. Where did my predecessors go wrong?"

"They tried to be moderate," said the old theologian. "Two presidents back, I forget the jigger's name, he gave in halfway to the Liberal Bunch. That only riled up As Is."

"Who's that?"

"As Is, they believe everything ought to be like it was. They go along with a little of this Old West stuff, but they keep howling for fancy things like mathematics and engineering and some high-falutin thing called humanities."

"Who runs As Is?"

"Slick young hombre named Danny Huddler. Looks like a card sharp or a faro dealer to me."

"Let me say again I'm much obliged to you prof," said Jolson. "Now I'll take me a bath."

"No more hot water till tomorrow." He shuffled backwards to the door. "Anything else I can do?"

"I was wondering where they stuck that Tim Hootman teaching machine after he got filled with lead."

"Like to tinker, do you?"

"Well, six guns ain't the only tool I'm handy with, let's say."

"He was dumped back of the little fake livery stable on the next street, over on the Sawdust Trail," said the old man. "Something funny about that there mechanical dingus."

"Such as?"

"Seems like a good many of the young folks he worked with," said DeBrunnis, "would just up and wander off. Quit school altogether like."

"Ever hear of a jigger named Sunflower?" asked Jolson.

"Nope. Never." He shrugged his round shoulders and left.

Jolson ate at the free-lunch counter in the Faculty Saloon and then went and searched the livery stable. There was no one there, but he found enough unused tools to use on the big grey teaching machine he discovered in the narrow backroom of the wooden building. Old West designs had been drawn on the surface of the square, man-size machine in paint and chalk. Cactus, ox skulls, six shooters, sombreros.

Jolson figured the Hootman machine must have given out recruiting information for Sunflower. There might be similar recruiters at other small colleges. He expected that on this machine's information tapes somewhere there might be a clue.

He was sitting on a new sawhorse and had the back of the machine just off when blaster fire started up outside. Hoofbeats mingled with the shooting, as shouts of, "Full-time rodeo or else!" began.

Ducking out the rear door of the stable, Jolson headed for the commotion. Students, most of them in Old West outfits, were running toward the Quad.

"Another showdown," shouted a pretty cowgirl.

Jolson caught her arm as she went by. "Ma'am."

"Let loose of me, stranger." Her slim fingers angled toward the pistol in her fringed bodice. "Who might you be anyways?"

"Well, now, I might be most any open-face stranger asking for a kind word," said Jolson. "But, in point of fact, I'm Will Mendoza, the new acting-president of this here school."

"Gosh darn," said the girl. "Is that a fact. Right proud to meet you." She dropped the hand away from her breasts and offered it for shaking. "How can I help you, Mendoza?"

"I'm curious about the shooting," said Jolson. "I'd like to know what it's about, prior to stopping it."

"It's Big Bob Oldenberg and about twenty of his Liberal Bunch, shooting up the Quad," the girl said. "They want the rodeo started again and more Western-oriented courses. Didn't anybody tell you about our troubles afore signing you on?"

"Yep, but I'm still trying to get the factions sorted out." The Quad had two dozen young men on grout and horseback riding around it, shooting off blaster pistols and waving pro-rodeo signs.

From down Purple Sage Lane a new group of young men came trotting. Grim-faced, wearing quieter clothes. "Now them is," explained the coed, "the As Is gang. That's Danny Huddler on the pinto grout. Got hisself all dressed up like a tinhorn."

Huddler was pale, wearing a swallow-tail coat, striped pants tucked into fancy boots. Before Jolson could ask anything further, a third pack of riders galloped into the Quad. They'd come riding hard along the Sawdust Trail.

"Bad medicine," said the girl. "There's old man MacStone, with the Estruma Kid and, looks like, fifty of them shifty-eyed waddies from the MacStone spread. That Estruma Kid is sort of decorative looking, though, ain't he?" She indicated a handsome man in his late thirties. He wore pale gold-

colored cowboys clothes and a gun belt with two gold-mounted guns. "You know what they say old man MacStone pays him?"

"Nope."

"$100 a week. Plus room and board."

"Hot dog," said Jolson. "Excuse me now." He left her and walked carefully into the Quad area. He dodged charging riders, pivoted to avoid a falling conservative, and climbed onto the pedestal of the cast-iron Indian. He drew his gun and shot Big Bob Oldenberg's sign out of his hand, then he shot off Danny Huddler's flat, black tinhorn hat. "Boys," he announced through cupped hands. "I'd like to make a policy statement if I might."

The Estruma Kid, with a left-sided grin, rode toward the statue and stopped his mount near Jolson. "Your shooting ain't bad," he said. "Like to try your luck with me?"

"Kid," said Jolson, "how much you making with MacStone?"

"$150 a week."

"I'll pay you $200 to teach here."

"Don't rag me now," replied the Kid. "Who are you anyhow?"

"Folks call me Will Mendoza."

"Son of a gun," said the Kid. "I'm glad I didn't draw on you."

The students were beginning to slow down, to guide their mounts over toward Jolson and the Estruma Kid.

"I'm also," said Jolson, "the acting-president of this here institution."

"No shit," said the Kid. "$200, huh? For what exactly?"

"We're going to add a course in gunfighting and Old West firearms," Jolson told him.

Big Bob Oldenberg, a wide, blond young man, said, "You are? Well, if that's the case I guess I won't kill you for shooting my protest sign."

"Wait now, Mr. Mendoza," said the bare-headed Danny Huddler. "I don't know as how I go along with this compromise."

"Now just a minute," shouted a bushy old man. "Nobody's doing nothing without it's okay by MacStone."

From the direction of Stonyville now a hundred mounted Provisional Government soldiers came. "Ain't going to be no more palaver now," observed the Estruma Kid. "Here comes the cavalry to horn in."

By the time Jolson got the blue-uniformed cavalry negotiated out of their fighting mood it was nearly sundown. He returned to the Tim Hootman machine as twilight was filling the now quiet campus. Only the occasional nickering of a horse was heard now, mingled with distant guitar strumming and a little yodeling

Working by an old-fashioned electric lantern, Jolson located the teaching machine's information

tapes and then got the thing repaired enough so he could monitor them. He tried first a nonsched-looking spool, and after he ran it through once rapidly, he played a section back at normal. Then Jolson knew where the kids were being sent.

Synthetic tumbleweed came rolling through the warm morning. Jolson, mounted on his grout, was galloping across the dry, flat land and heading for the Joshua Territory. Far to his left sat flat, jagged bluffs, yellow, orange and earth brown. The air was sharp and clean and Jolson did a little yodeling, a knack he'd acquired during a sleepbriefing.

As he rode on, Jolson became aware of hoofbeats coming up far behind him. He looked back and saw a fat horseman approaching. "Whoa there." Turning half in the saddle, Jolson thumbed back the brim of his dark sombrero and then lowered his hand to rest over the butt of his Old West blaster.

The approaching rider was Sheriff Breezy Balmer. He waved his hat in the air. "Howdy there, you old waddie," he called. "You sure travel like a bat out of hell, Mendoza."

"Yep, I do indeed. You want me for something?"

"I don't want you for nothing but companionship."

"I'm heading southeast, on college business."

"Okay by me," said the sheriff. "I'm heading to pay a call on old man MacStone."

"Thought his spread was up to the north."

"It is. I'll part company with you at Devil's Fork. That is, if you ain't against me sharing the wasteland with you."

"Nope." Jolson started his grout to galloping again. After a bit he said, "I was thinking, Breezy, that no strangers couldn't come through these parts without you'd know about it."

"That's for sure a fact. You interested in somebody in particular."

"Might be a friend of mine passed through here recent."

"What's he calling himself?"

"I ain't sure," said Jolson. "His actual name is Bronzini. I don't reckon he'd be using it."

"Nope," said the pudgy sheriff. "Don't know nothing about any such." They had ridden down into an arroyo, and just beyond a great pile of rock and boulders they came upon a fallen-in shack and what looked to be the entrance of an abandoned mine. "Hey, now, look at there."

"Old broke-down house," said Jolson. "What about it?"

"I thought I saw the flash of a rifle barrel in the mouth of that shaft," said Breezy, low voiced. He gave Jolson a sudden shove. "Hit the dirt and get to cover."

Jolson left his stirrups and

saddle and landed on hard ground. He started to run for the rocks.

Breezy came running after him, and before Jolson reached cover the fat sheriff had smacked him over the head with his gun butt. "I fooled you for sure," he chuckled and hit Jolson again.

Jolson slept through the explosion. He knew there had been one when he saw the rocks and dirt and fragments of timber that blocked the entrance to the mine shaft. He was inside the mine shaft, about a thousand feet back from the debris. He coughed dirt out of his mouth and sat full up. Two very thin streams of daylight were getting in through the blockage.

Jolson's left leg buckled under when he stood. He massaged it, gritting his teeth, and finally he was able to walk. He studied the rocks and dirt. There looked to be several tons of the stuff corking him in. Breezy Balmer apparently wanted him here permanently.

Backing away, Jolson reached under his shirt for his truth kit. He opened it and took from it a small palm-size torch. He slipped the kit away and clicked on the little light. "Might as well take a look at the rest of this hole," he said.

A few thousand feet into the narrow rocky shaft he noticed something on the wall. He swung the beam of the torch. A vinyl tag was screwed to the stone. It read: *Frimac Fakes, Inc. The Best In Pseudo-West Props. When reordering specify Fake Mine Shaft #1137.*

Jolson nodded and continued on down. Another thousand yards and he tripped over a dead man. The man wore only a suit of redlong johns. He'd been shot and was at least two days dead. It was Breezy Balmer. Kneeling briefly beside him, Jolson said, "The real Breezy. So it must have been Bronzini himself who bricked me up."

He walked on and in a few moments came to a door. This was dull metal and had EMERGENCY EXIT stenciled on it. Jolson hesitated, then pushed at the handle bar. The door swung open and he saw late afternoon desert outside.

Staying in shadows, Jolson removed his sombrero and flipped it, cartwheeling, out into daylight. Nothing resulted. "Okay," he said and left the prop tunnel. The rear exit let out on the other side of the boulders. "Bronzini isn't being thorough enough. Fortunately."

Jolson sat on a rock for a while and rubbed at his sore spots. Then he whistled, with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. At some distance his grout made a snorting sound and then, cautiously, came trotting around to him. "Howdy," Jolson said to his mount. He swung into the saddle

and rode on, aimed at Joshua Territory. He saw no more of the false Breezy Balmer.

Jolson pulled his pack-carrying robot out of the quicksand and shouted, "I can see you don't watch me on television." He got the round, six-armed mechanism back on the jungle trail.

The voice grid on the robot was clogged with wet sand and rotted leaves. In a moment it scooped it clean and replied, "No, sir. How would that have helped?"

"Two reporters came up to me just yesterday in the lobby of the Joshua Territory Ritz and asked, 'Aren't you Alfred Gerald Mowgli?' I replied, 'You bet your ass I am. I'm Alfred Gerald Mowgli, the noted electrojournalist.' Each of these two twits had recently viewed 'The Dilemma of Hockey.' "

"Which was what, sir?"

Jolson got all the luggage and camera cases and supply packs brushed clean and back into the robot's many hands. "Well, you dumb peckerhead, that's one of my recent teledocumentaries. I'm famous for the frigging things."

"Exactly how would a show about hockey have kept me from getting immersed in a quagmire, sir?"

Jolson, who was a tall, broad black man now, yelled, "It was my earlier teledocumentary you should have seen, you boob." He gave the robot a foreward-sending kick. The Hootman machine tape had told him Sunflower was headquartered in a ruined ancient city in the jungles of the Joshua Territory. Jolson took on a new identity to come into the jungle in question. "The show was entitled 'The Shame of Our Swamps.' At the time a lot of critics said I'd hit my peak. How could I top it? What would I do next? In fact, even yesterday those reporter boobs in the hotel lobby asked similar questions. What's the famed Alfred Gerald Mowgli up to?"

"You told them?"

"Bet your ass," yelled Jolson. "I'm out here gathering material for my new teledocumentary, which I'll call 'The Shocking Truth About Ruins.' Archeology explained and shown simply and with grace. It'll do better than 'The Crisis In Whittling,' and that teledocumentary of mine got ratings that were stunning. Eight hundred million people watched it. Plus a hundred million lizard men, six million cat people and roughly 800,000 zombies."

"Well, I don't watch much television, though I've carried a lot of sets. I used to work with a mover."

"Good for you, peckerhead," yelled Jolson.

Two young men stepped onto the trail fifty yards ahead of them. Each had a blaster rifle aimed at Jolson. "We couldn't help overhearing you," said one. He was

taller and thinner, wearing a tattered buff-colored coverall.

"I must admit I've been chided now and then for talking loudly," roared Jolson. "However, I believe one of the chief tasks the Good Lord—if you tuned in on my teledocumentary 'Our Mounting Religious Crisis,' you know all about it already—set for us is to communicate. Make ourselves heard as well as seen, exchange ideas, trumpet thoughts far and wide. Who the crap are you guys?"

The taller, thinner young man lowered his rifle and moved closer. Sunlight from the midday sun flickered on him as he walked beneath the thick-leafed trees. "Well, this will probably strike you as a coincidence, Mr. Mowgli, but we're archeologists, too. We're looking for the ruins of a lost city of sun worshippers."

"Son of a bitch," cried Jolson, rubbing his broad black nose. "Are you two fellows the entire party?"

"No, sir," said the other young man. He had a plump face and a reddish mustache. "Lloyd failed to mention we're only assistants to someone who is, in our humble opinion, a swell archeologist. Perhaps you've heard of her, Dr. Maggie Mezzerow."

"Is that old bimbo still alive? Jesus, she must be ninety."

"Ninety-one," said Lloyd.

Jolson shouted, "The old dame knows her ruins, but she hasn't got much stage presence."

"Alfred Gerald," said a thin old voice. "Still a loudmouth." A small, chubby old woman in a tweed coverall shuffled out of the foliage. She had an aluminum cane to help her walk, a hunting pistol in her freckled right hand. "I told you at that Relics Convention on Murdstone thirty-six years ago that you were a bright child but you should learn to shut up. Still true." She stumbled and fell over sideways into a tangle of passion flowers.

"Let's let bygones be bygones, you crusty old broad."

Lloyd rushed to aid the fallen archeologist. She seemed to rise out of the vines just a second before his helping hand got a grip on her. "Are you okay, Dr. Mezzerow?"

"Fit as a fiddle," replied the old woman.

"Hey, Maggie, why don't we team up?" shouted Jolson. "I'm ruins-hunting, too."

"For another of your dreadful television shows, I imagine," said Maggie Mezzerow. "Very well, Alfred Gerald, you can join us, but you must try to be still sometimes."

Jolson jogged down the trail. "I'll sit at your goddamn feet in abject silence, Maggie." He whapped the old woman on the back. She apparently had a truth kit, similar to his, strapped beneath her left arm.

The robot was shaking him with six hands. "Wake up, sir, but be silent."

Jolson sat up. The tent canvas was lightening, and cold dawn air was whispering in. Jolson glanced around his tent. "What is it?"

"I overheard them plotting," said the machine softly. "The two boys and the old lady. They already know where the lost city is, the ruins and all."

"I figured as much."

"You did? Did you also figure they're planning to lure you into a remote place within the ruins and sink you in a bottomless pool?"

"Not the specifics, no," said Jolson. "But the intent, yes."

The robot sat back from Jolson's sleeping bag, rung its three pairs of hands. "You act as though you want them to try this."

"Seems like the fastest way to locate the lost city of Jirasol," said Jolson. "The guy who told me about it only had enough information to put me in the general vicinity. I was hoping to run into some guards, which is what these folks are."

"You're not quite the buffoon you pretend," observed the round robot.

Jolson jerked out of his sleeping bag and began doing knee bends. "Two dozen of these each morning and you never grow old," he said in a loud voice. Lower voiced, he added, "When we move out today you hang back, wait here. I may have some stuff for you to carry out."

The tent flap rattled and Dr. Mezzerow, fully clothed, squinted in. "Quickly, Alfred Gerald. We've made an amazing find while you were still snoozing. You'll never guess what we've located."

"I can't come till I finish my exercises," shouted Jolson. "I want to live a long, healthy life."

Stone suns were carved on the faintly yellow stone wall. The vines and ferns and mosses of the deep jungle mingled thickly with the vines and grain and fruit carved into the now half-fallen wall. Through the thick forest Jolson noticed other walls and tiered buildings.

Dr. Mezzerow spiked her cane into the loamy ground in front the high wall. "Seems to be part of a temple, wouldn't you say, Alfred Gerald?"

"Bet your ass," said Jolson.

The old woman moved to an opening in the ancient wall, a low square doorway. "Why, look. There appears to be a stairway leading downward. More of this old building must exist below ground. Lloyd, you and Bobby stay out here. Alfred Gerald, hand me one of those hand torches and we'll have ourselves a look-see."

As Jolson stepped up to the old woman, six bright-scarlet birds fluttered up from the jagged top of

the broken wall, flapped striped wings. "Better let me go first," he yelled. "Your old bones may not be up to navigating what we find in there."

"Very well, Alfred Gerald," said Maggie Mezzerow "You enter first and I'll light the way for us."

Jolson stepped down into darkness. Then the light came following and showed some fifty wide steps angling sharply down and then turning, their end unseen. He climbed downward. There was a chill dampness as they went lower, and he sensed water somewhere around a bend. Jolson got three steps ahead of the ancient archeologist and then stumbled. "Son of a bitch," he said. He guarded his head with his hands and balled down a dozen hard steps and around the turn. There was an alcove and a flat circular place with what might be more steps dropping further underground.

"Alfred Gerald?" called Dr. Mezzerow. She sounded to be still where she had been when he began his tumble.

Jolson groaned once. He flattened against the carved stone of the alcove, drew his pistol from beneath his tunic.

"You dumb spade, did you crack your head or something?"

Jolson stayed quiet. The old woman's booted feet shuffled closer; her metal cane clacked. The light of the torch quavered closer. When Dr. Mezzerow appeared, Jolson jumped and gave her two quick side-handed chops beneath the ear.

The old woman gave a hollow sigh and doubled up. The torch spun up and away from her dropping body. Jolson caught the light, keeping his pistol aimed at her. She made a rumpled smack and stretched out on the stone floor. Jolson listened. No one else was coming from above. He got the old woman's hands behind her and tied them with the belt from her coverall. Then he hefted her and continued down. The next fifty steps ended on a wide stone shelf. There was no one here. Over the edge of the shelf there was still, dark water.

Jolson propped Dr. Mezzerow against a stone pole ornamented with carved climbing vines and flowers. He slapped her wrinkled face gently. "Bronzini, Bronzini," he said. "Wake up and let's talk."

The old woman's left eye clicked open first. "Alfred Gerald, what are you up to?"

"Bronzini, you can talk now or after I give you something from the truth kit," Jolson said. "I can use my own kit or the one you're carrying."

"Okay, Jolson," said the old woman. "It is you, huh?"

"Right, Bronzini."

"I got a tap on that nitwit Wheeler-Woolsey's office," said the Chameleon Corps agent. "But

you didn't check in with him this time and I had to guess."

"You were Breezy Balmer?"

"I was. I didn't want to kill you. Just keep you out of the way for a while. You escaped from the mine shaft pretty fast."

"Why'd you kill the original Breezy Balmer?"

Bronzini shook his old lady head. "I didn't. That was that old bastard MacStone and his sidekick, the Estruma Kid. I happened to stumble on the body. When I learned you were coming as Will Mendoza, I decided to double as the sheriff."

"Why have you quit being on our side?"

Bronzini said, "Well, Jolson. Well, I wasn't quite accurate and truthful in filling out my original forms. You know, I didn't join the Chameleon Corps until I was twenty, not like you."

"So?"

"Before I became a CC agent I lived with a girl out here. We had a daughter. When I got this assignment, I figure I ought to look my daughter up. Mother's dead and I've been out of touch."

"Your daughter has joined up with Sunflower?"

"That's right," said Bronzini. "Those bastards at the Timbrook Foundation guessed I was a fake and who I really was. Then that snotty android, 26X, he told me about Marina. That's her name, Marina. A pretty girl, shy."

"How old?"

"Nineteen."

"You ignore her for twenty years," said Jolson. "Then you up and decide to kill people because of her."

"You're not forty yet," said Bronzini. "And not a father. You don't understand."

"Has Sunflower turned her into one of those Suicide Kids?"

Bronzini shook his head. "Not yet, see, Jolson. That's what they're holding over me. If I don't keep working for Sunflower, he'll implant one of those damn bombs and talk her into killing herself for the cause. The bastard has got some kind of power, some charisma."

"Who is he?"

"He's Wilbur Daniel Slack, just like they told us."

"Where is he?"

Bronzini nodded his grey head. "A half a mile from us. That's the rest of Jirasol, the ruins of the ancient city. He's got three hundred or more kids living there with him and a hundred mercenary troops."

"What were you supposed to do with me?"

"Sink you in the sacred pool. I'm sorry," said Bronzini. "He's got a half dozen fake groups roaming the jungle on the lookout for any intruders. You came in this way and hit my team. I've been here doing this since I left you in the shaft."

"Okay," said Jolson. "You can

give me more details while we're going into Jirasol."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to see Sunflower," said Jolson. "You're going to take me."

"He'll kill Marina if I turn against him."

Jolson said, "No, we'll stop him. We'll save her and the rest of the kids."

"How?"

"I haven't worked that out yet."

"You expect a lot on faith, Jolson."

"Or," Jolson told him, "I can drop you in the pool and come up out of here as Professor Maggie Mezzerow."

Bronzini said, "I want to get her out of there. You promise me you can save Marina?"

"I promise you I'll try."

"Okay, I'll help," said Bronzini. "Who are you going in as, not this spade?"

"No, as Lloyd or Bobby," said Jolson. "Whichever one comes down here to investigate first. I'll tie him up and leave him here until this is over."

Jolson untied Bronzini and gave him back the light. "You knew I wasn't a dame, huh?"

"Yes," said Jolson. "You're too masculine to be quite convincing."

"Damn," said Bronzini. "That's what those bastards back at Timbrook said."

The vast tower room was ringed with arched window openings, each grilled over with a cross of twisted metal. Blazing suns were carved into the dome ceiling. From up here the remains of Jirasol could be seen. Heavy, blocky buildings, all stone, partially immersed in the richly green and scarlet jungle now. A single black bird balanced at one of the window arches, pecking in at a quarter of a sandwich sitting on a plastic plate just inside the grillwork.

The oval stone floor was crowded with machines. Portable computers, kidney machines, surgical robots, simulators, retrieval bins, a soft-drink unit, and jumbles of entertainment gadgets. Unfinished sandwiches, half-empty vinyl cups of milk and root beer sat on machine tops throughout the tower.

Wilbur Daniel Slack blinked when Bronzini pushed Jolson into the room. "What?" He was a small, fragile-looking man of nearly forty. Thinner now than in the photos of him in the PEO files. He had tossled, greying blond hair, and his blue eyes were pained and pale.

"I ran into a couple kids on the way up here," said Bronzini. "They told me they were bringing this repaired data machine up here. I took it since I was headed for you anyhow."

Jolson, who now resembled a man-high white-enameled data-storage unit, rolled nearer to Sunflower.

"Why were you coming in here?" Slack asked.

Bronzini said, "To report on a successful mission."

Slack shook his head and began to get out of the metal chair he was in. "I'm at work, dictating some memos. Didn't my guard tell you?"

Bronzini, who was still old Maggie Mezzerow, nodded. "I figured this was important enough to intrude. So did your guard."

Slack ran his tongue over his cracked lips. "Now listen. This may strike you as a odd question. But who are you exactly?"

"I'm Ed Bronzini."

"You don't look it."

"Chameleon Corps, remember?"

Slack patted the tarnished top of a research machine and found a cluster of red pellets. "You don't realize the pressures that go along with my position." He raked four pellets into his palm and licked them into his mouth. He blinked again, inhaled with his teeth wide apart. He looked more closely at the machine top. "Oh, darn." He hopped around the unit and went to a refrigerator. Yanking open the door, he grabbed a beaker of yellow liquid and drank from it. Hurrying back to his chair, he took four more red pellets. "I got the sequence wrong. It's supposed to be yellow stuff first, then red stuff." He yawned, blinked. "Yes, well, hello there, Bronzini. What is it?"

"I encountered the new Chameleon Corps agent while on patrol in the jungle," said Bronzini. "He's been taken care of."

"Chameleon Corps?" Slack made a sideways slicing motion with his hand. "I've got too damn much going around in my head, Bronzini. Co-ordinating all this, directing the ultimate salvation of this planet, being the philosophical leader of so many nice young people . . . it wears a man down. You can't shirk a calling, a vocation . . . but the strain is apt to tell. I got stuck in surgery last night until way after midnight. I didn't actually check a clock, but I'm pretty sure it was that late at least. I was implanting." He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger. "I love these young people, Bronzini, and I have no trouble getting girls to act as nurses. Well, you have to keep after them to wash their hands and faces before surgery, but they're sweet and cooperative otherwise. I can't, though, train these damn kids, not one of them, for surgical work itself. Too much trouble, they think. Same way at the university. Thank god, I got into research. Right?"

"Is my daughter," asked Bronzini, "still okay?"

Slack rubbed the circle of fingers across his dry mouth. "Who is she?"

"Marina, my daughter."

"Yes, of course," said Slack.

"Stop picking on me. She's fine. As long as you keep doing nice things for Sunflower, he'll see she comes to no harm." Slack got up again. "Remember she volunteered to join me. She was tired of the kind of world your sort had made for her. She loves Sunflower and what he stands for." He opened a cabinet and took up a pillbox. "This is something some of the kids gave me. They all love me, all believe in Sunflower." He fingered out two blue spansules. "These stabilize the effects of the other stuff I have to take. Having a vocation, a destiny to fulfill is a fearful responsibility, Bronzini. You can go now. Good-bye, good luck. Take the rest of the day off."

Jolson rolled closer to Sunflower's chair as Bronzini departed the tower.

"Accuse me of things," said Sunflower, swallowing the spansules and washing them down with sour milk. "That doesn't taste too good. Accuse me and it's them anyhow. That's the problem. You do it for them and it's all right and they're happy and they say they like you. Put together exploding people and it's fine when it's for them but not when it's for me." He sat again and reached for a hand-dictating mike. "You have a conscience and they criticize you. Now, when I'm doing something good and the kids like me, they don't understand. No, it has to be all right and the strain is okay. Yes, that's right. You couldn't become a leader of something like this and be wrong. Right? Yes, it's okay. I should take better care of my things. No, I'm Sunflower. That's the important thing, to have taken on the name of this dead-and-gone religious leader, to assume the name of this philosopher of the ruins. Certainly it stands for something." He frowned at the mike, rubbed it on his chin. "I never feel good any more. Not at all. Well, that's to be expected. When this is over, when they're not in charge, then I'll feel okay. When the killing stops, the strain will stop. The way working for them had to stop." He stood, then sat again. "Stop it now. Things are going along fine. Didn't the Chameleon Corps man say he'd done something admirable? Something or other." He rose and walked to the arched window where the black bird was still pecking.

Jolson rolled up behind him, through the clutter. He changed to himself and got an arm-lock on Sunflower. He tugged the frail man's pistol from his waist holster. "Okay, Slack," he said.

Sunflower twisted his head to look back. "You're like all these kids here. Not dressed, running around sloppy. I try to tell them it's not enough to have convictions, you have to have some style."

"Bronzini," called Jolson.

The major returned. He held a pistol aimed at Sunflower. "Here's your clothes, Jolson. That's one disadvantage of doing machines."

Jolson slowly spun Sunflower around and let him go. He caught the coverall the major threw and got it on. "Now we'll get to your communications center, Slack, and call in some help from the Political Espionage Office and the Provisional Government."

"You're going to make me halt my work here?"

"Yes."

"You don't seem to realize how important I am," Sunflower told him. "You don't realize how important I am to young people."

"But I do," said Jolson.

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Alleo Forkson was one hundred eighty-seven years old. His "job" was to search his own mind, to crawl back in time, memory by memory. There was one special memory that eluded him, until he found the key that took him back to the first decade of his life, and even further . . .

THE WARMEST MEMORY

by Bruce McAllister

THERE WAS SOMETHING MISSing in the old man's life. In one sense there should not have been, since Alleo Forkson had a whole planet to himself—a rare Earth-type planet at that. The missing item was not a tangible thing, but rather a memory of his very early years, a memory which refused to enter his consciousness.

He lived alone on his planet, had lived there alone ten years, and he spent his waking hours—and many of his sleeping hours—probing his mind, step by step, memory by memory, crawling back in time toward the first years of his life. This was his "job," now that he was retired, now that the Pension Directives had given him a planet of his own, now that he was one hundred eighty-seven years old. Through a search for memories, he could unite the years of his living.

The day he first approached the path to the missing memory began as he stood on the sands of his beach and fingered his special necklace. He fingered a white, sand-worn shell on the necklace, and that shell was one of the keys he had found to certain past years. He fingered the bleached skull of a small reptile, another key; and a piece of greenish agate; and a section of reddish bark; and the tiny legbone of a rodent. One by one he fingered all the hundred keys-to-memories on his necklace, taking pride in the fact that he persisted in collecting, keeping and diligently wearing the small objects that helped him Remember times he'd once forgotten and would forget again unless he had help. In his pessimism about forgetfulness, he also made voice-tapes in his mobil-home each time he Remem-

bered another event of the past.

He had spent ten years on that beach, on those sands by the yellow cliffs, and in the fields above the cliffs, and in his mobil-home that rested on the dirt flat above the cliffs. For ten years a twenty-square-mile area had been the stage for his Remembering, and he had gotten to know it well, but today there was no satisfaction from strolling the beach in casual search for "keys" and memories. There was a certain special memory hiding from him.

He had found the piece of greenish agate high on the beach sands, and it had reminded him of the green lakes of the planet where he and his second wife had homesteaded a hundred ten years ago. The green stone did not remind him directly that she had died twenty-eight years ago, and that was just as well: there were other, more pleasant details of the past perceptible through the "lens" of the agate.

He had found the white sea shell in fluffs of sand on the mid-beach line, and it had reminded him of his first assignment in the Human Acclimation Division of Sansco Instellodyssey, the corporation whose Pension Directives had honored his long service by awarding him this Earth-type world as a retirement site. That first job with Instello—he remembered now for the thousandth time as he stood on the sands—had been an artistic one, so to speak: to write lyrics for music piped throughout the Instello passenger vessels. His first lyrics had been clumsy ones, as he admitted now, about a chambered nautilus shell, "rising through the star-froth seas of space . . ."

The tiny legbone of a rodent—one he'd found in the dirt at a crumbling part of the cliffs—had managed to remind him of the thinness of his first wife's body, a thinness he had married a hundred sixty years ago on Earth, in a time before the great flights past Pluto, before the homesteading on other worlds, before the human longevity experiments and successes, and ten years before his first wife's death in a helicar accident.

The small legbone—he reflected proudly now on the sands—was the key to the earliest years he could Remember. Earth was the earliest he could Remember. There had been a hundred other planets in his life, but Earth had been the first; he had been born there, he knew. The missing memory had to be about Earth, about the first twenty-four years of the old man's life.

As he stood on the beach, he thought about how non-human objects like bark and rocks could remind him of *human* events in his past even more effectively than the presence of actual human beings could. Even when the

Pension Directives ship landed every ten months with its two "monitors," men who were assigned to bring supplies and longevity drugs to Alleo Forkson (and to the other retired members of Instello, wherever they were in the Universe), the presence of those two male humans did not aid his Remembering. In fact, they were an intrusion.

For the rest of the day he stared hard at a lot of objects, searching for the key to the missing memory. He concentrated on a piece of brown seaweed, then on a striped beach-bird bobbing along the sands, then on an egg-shaped boulder halfway submersed in a large tide-pool, then on a puffy slow-paced cloud. All these things helped him Remember, but the memories were not of the first twenty-four years of his life.

After three days of concentration, of staring hard until his eyes hurt, it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps "concentration" did not mean only *visual* concentration.

He walked down the ramp from his mobil-home and entered the yellow-grass fields where he began concentrating on smells, first on the mauve blossoms that dominated the field. Remembering only the perfumes of older women he had known, he left the flowers in defeat. In the next four hours he smelled a rotting animal in a tide-pool, then sniffed the mud under a flat rock in another tide-pool, then four kinds of seaweed; and finally, back in the fields again he smelled for a long time a clump of dark-brown earth crawling with small insects.

The next day he concentrated on taste, and at the end of three hours was sick to his stomach from licking or chewing everything in sight. As he took two pills to calm his stomach, he looked at his fingers and wanted to kick himself for not thinking of "touch."

Hurrying back to the beach again, he began touching and touching. He closed his eyes, concentrated, and touched rocks, seaweed, salt deposits in a dried-out tide-pool, a dead bird, the brown egg-case of a marine vertebrate, a rainbow-colored clamshell . . .

He was squatting to reach for a three-toned pebble on the wet sand when something crystalline shimmered in the corner of his eye. He turned, looked closer at the sands, and discovered a jellyfish on the sand, nearly invisible because of its transparent, amoebic body.

The old man stared, and the jellyfish still looked crystalline, except softer, as it quivered in the wind. He touched it with a finger.

Instead of a sting, he felt a coolness, a coolness that pushed back against his touch, unlike the cold tide-pool water that gave way to his fingers.

Coolness and crystal-clearness and coolness and . . .

Suddenly he Remembered "ice"! A part of the missing memory opened to him, stopped its teasing, and called itself "ice"! And something more . . .

Why he had never thought of ice and *snow* in the last ten years, he didn't know. A simple reason —he reflected—could be that ice and snow belonged only to the first few decades of his life and were therefore more difficult to Remember. And besides, it never froze or snowed on the beach or fields, or within sight at all.

Alleo Forkson realized now that only *real* ice and snow could be the complete key to the rest of his earliest memory. He knew now he would have to fly his mobil-home, move it for the first time in ten years, to search for a land of ice and snow.

As he landed his mobil-home in a region gauzed with evening, he knew that being this far north meant that the evening would last a long time, that daylight would last six months, as would the night. It was a land totally of ice and snow, a completely grand land for him, one that sent him shivers of anticipation.

Twilight shrouded him as he walked down the ramp from his mobil-home, and he stopped twice on the way to gaze out at the blue-cast ice-scape and snow. His mind had begun swirling in a menthol syrup of near-memories.

He sat down on the ice, drank the cold that shot through his jump-suit. No snow fell, but his mind's eyes suddenly saw falling snow, his mind's ear heard a significant melody with lyrics, and he knew then that snow meant something important, was at the crux of his missing memory. Snow meant a special season of the year. On the beach there had been no seasonal changes really; Winter had been missing. But now in this new region there would be *only* Winter, that season of the year whose uniqueness was beginning to articulate itself to him. *Winterland,* he reflected, and his Remembering struggled to give him more.

The cold lanced through him again, flapped its icy wings through his spine, and told him to Remember that he could do things with snow. With his gloved hands he scraped at the packed snow, and in a minute he had a pile of loose flakes to work with.

He made a "snowball," and an unfamiliar cry of satisfaction escaped his throat. He was Remembering well now. The Past was cold white blood rushing at him, telling him that he could do things with snow, that snow had been a special thing to young boys long ago.

He began trembling. Young boys! Youth! That meant he was reaching far back in his life, per-

haps even back to his first decade of life!

The cold embraced him in a final surge, and he got up.

As he rose on weak knees, the cold told him everything. He saw back to a day in the seventh year of his life. He saw himself as a small woolen-clad boy busy at play in the snow of Earth . . .

The Pension Directives ship and its two-man crew had left the day before. Alleo Forkson sat down at the voice-recorder in his mobil-home and spoke into it slowly and confidently:

"As they told me later, when we spoke frankly to each other, the two men aboard the supply-ladden Pension Directives ship were surprised to find that my contact signals were issuing from another spot than the beach. After all, I had stayed at the beach ten years.

"They were even more surprised to find—as they dropped from the sky toward my mobil-home—that I had chosen for my new site a miserably cold area presently in twilight.

"As they told me later, their ship landed, and both men exited from it casually, expecting me to greet them with my usually curt, 'Here's the list. I need such-and-such and such-and-such . . .'

"I didn't greet them.

"After an hour of searching the mobil-home for me, Josef and Will paused at my recorder, then realized that one tape had been completed some time ago and left in the machine. They decided to listen to it, thinking it might give them a clue as to my whereabouts.

"My voice began, announcing that this tape would be about my earliest memory, about a day when I was seven years old, out in the snow and Winterland of Earth. My taped voice said, 'There are two parts to the culmination of my earliest memory. I have worked up to them with background detail on this tape, and now I must mention the culmination. The verbal part of it I can put on tape, the other part I cannot. I must make the other with my hands, and I will do that soon. The first can be taped, and I will tape it now . . .'

"As the first part of my missing memory, my voice began singing. As I realize, my voice is cracked with age, and the sounds I made were not very much like a melody.

"When the song ended, Will—the younger member of the crew—asked, 'What's Christmas?'

"Josef answered, 'A religious holiday. Came in the invernal season, during frozen precipitation.'

"Will said, 'Oh.'

" 'You don't understand . . . The song said: I'm dreaming of a white Christmas . . . Don't you sense the connection? Snow, ice?'

" 'Yes, I guess so. White Christmas . . . white from the snow and ice.'

" 'Of course . . .' Josef had studied socio-historical items like Christmas twenty years ago; massive hypno-education made forgetting such information difficult. As it was, Will had missed a year of hypno-education from an illness and had yet to make it up to fit Standard.

"Will and Josef turned off the tape and left the mobil-home. The great expanse of snow and ice was the only thing left to search, looking for me. It was growing lighter now, in the dawn of the land where night yawned six months long, and their search would be easier.

"In the waning twilight, on the other side of the mobil-home, five hundred feet from it, the two men finally saw something and stopped.

"To them it looked like a giant hominid at first. Then its absurd proportions grew clearer, and as they approached, Will and Josef gradually understood that the 'giant' was made out of snow. A big ball formed its base, and onto the base had been molded the bas-reliefs of two legs. On top of the base rested a slightly smaller ball of snow—a 'torso' with two thick arms molded on either side of it. The head was another small ball, and for eyes the thing had a white beach-worn shell and a greenish stone—both pressed into the snow of the 'head.'

"I was behind my snowman, and had been waiting for them a long time. With many months passed in the Winterland, I had a plan . . .

"I stepped out in front of them, greeted them as amicably as I could, and in a short amount of time had them molding balls of snow with me. At first they thought I was insane. I told them how to play with snow. I showed them how, and they began to understand what I was feeling. I'm not young any more, so I couldn't join them when they took their snowballs and ran and threw them at each other, laughing; but I 'ran' with them in my own way.

"When they returned their eyes were glazed, and it seemed, as I had hoped, that they were Remembering, even though they had never played in snow, on Earth or anywhere.

"In two hours we had made another man of snow, using personal possessions for its facial features. The sun had risen finally, but its rays were not melting the snow in the cold air, and our two snowmen stood staring at each other as if across the millennia of human time. We were all Remembering across an eon . . .

"Will and Josef stayed two days longer than they were supposed to. They're gone now, to finish their visits to other retire-

ment worlds, and I'm here with the two snowmen. Josef and Will will come back, as they said they would. I knew they would want to come back, to return not in ten months, but in two months, with their families, on vacation.

"Will and Josef understood."

When he finished his voice-tape, Alleo Forkson left his mobil-home, walked across the crackle and crunch of the ice to the two snowmen, and lay down between them, as he often did to think and meditate.

Soon the cold was into his jump-suit, snaking across his skin and spine and conjuring up strange phantasms for him. Was one a face he had known in his youth, in the snow? Was one the face of his first wife? Was one a strange face perceived in an instant in an asphalt and steel megalopolis?

No . . . gradually all the ghosts brought by the fanged cold fused into a vision of the snowman he had made by himself, and the snowman stood by him, whispering to him. The snowman wanted Alleo Forkson to do something special.

"I am more," said the snowman, "than your personal past."

"I know," the old man answered, knowing that all this talk could be mere prelude to what the snowman really wanted him to do out here in the cold, on the ice and snow.

"Will and Josef understood me," said the snowman.

"I know, I know."

"They understood that there are racial memories which the human race does not understand, even now in its history."

"I know," said Alleo Forkson, and he whispered back in the strophe-antistrophe manner demanded by the snowman: "For a long, long time Man has known about certain clear archetypes, primal symbols of the race, like martyr-figures, yin and yang, animus-anima, mandala wheels, crosses, journeys through time and space. Those are racial memories . . ."

"But there are others, too," said the snowman.

"Yes, there are others," answered the old man. "Earth is passé, still hot with radiation from that 'accident' two hundred years ago . . . But Man remembers Earth, and his youth on Earth. On Earth, when Man was young, there were frozen years—"

"When everything," interrupted the snowman, "was covered with my flesh. Frozen years and years of glaciers and snows and ice and your infant race struggling to live with its primitive soul."

"I know, I know. I am Man. We still bear that primitive soul. Even with the thousands of man-inhabited planets, the passage of eras and the rise of Man's own alien technology, we haven't for-

gotten those years of youth, and frozen years, and your icy flesh, my friend."

"I know, I know too. All you need is a ball of snow or a man of snow like myself on an Earth-type planet to help you Remember. Your friends, Will and Josef, like you, they Remember."

"I do Remember, and it is a far finer memory than the first decade of my life."

"And in two months," said the snowman, "when Will and Josef return, their families will find themselves Remembering too."

"You and I—my friend—know full well they'll come to this world for good—Will and Josef, when they retire. But I won't be here then . . ."

"No, you won't be here," said the snowman.

Now, Alleo Forkson knew, the snowman's request would finally come—silently, but as strong as an eon's memory.

"You won't be here," repeated the snowman portentously, and the old man felt the cold and knew this was his Earth. The snowman finally whispered to him: "The perfect womb for a man-child should not be a warm one at all . . ."

As he had known he would, Alleo Forkson grew sleepy in the cold's embrace, in the snowman's hug. The old man knew now—as the snowman whispered—that never again would he rise up and walk like a forgetful modern man toward the alien heat of his mobil-home.

As the cold burrowed quickly into his bones, something from his youth and Christmas—a vision called a "sugar plum"—flashed through his head. And was gone. Was gone.

Katrina Faldt-Larsen is twenty-four, a graduate of Wells College, "which assured me that if it matriculated no men, neither did it require that I take any more math. Then I wandered north to Syracuse University where I spent two years in the creative writing program under the gentle wing of George P. Elliott. I'm presently finishing my first novel, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP, MOTHER. *My formal vices seem to consist of collecting brass beds and a sort of couchant feminism obvious in the story."*

MOTHER'S DAY

CHAPTER TWELVE OF A CONCISE HISTORY OF MODERN FEMINISM, IN WHICH THE TORCH ALMOST GOES OUT IN DEEP SPACE

by Katrina Faldt-Larsen

THE *Olgaddanea* SLIPPED INTO deep space with no more sign than a gentle if ominous vibration that just reached the wrists, hands and ankles of the seven crewmen strapped into the body-conformed acceleration chambers. The white porous-vinyl chambers held them like pressers' boards in old-fashioned cleaning shops; flight specifications had nicknamed the things the body press. Each press covered its crewman completely, taking care of respiration, recording heart rate and physical data, as well as providing anesthetic hypnosis and temperature control for suspended animation in case the hyperspace mechanism were to fail. In that case, the press would be able to keep the crew alive for an estimated thousand light-years, presumably until somebody found them. (Like waffle irons, the press could be left open, and could, in this position, serve adequately as a bed.)

Morgana Daen breathed deeply

as the press opened and the retractable bodystraps unlatched and slipped back to become an indistinguishable part of the smooth vinyl cover.

Well, she thought, I've made it. I'm the first woman in deep space. Hot damn.

That hot damn smoothed over a good deal of the embarrassment of knowing how much she'd really wanted this, and she'd wanted it bad. She'd have polished the hair on the general's ass with turtle wax every day for a month if she'd thought it would have written her ticket on the Olga.

It wouldn't have.

Fifteen years of astroflight school, enforced flight regimen, flight instructors capable of reducing news of an unexpected supernova into clinically diagnosable boredom among their students, no vacations, and plenty of bad jokes about her sex. Other women had changed their minds just reading the catalog.

"You'll be the first interstellar stewardess, Morgana; 'Caffeine tabs or sea curds,' that'll be you."

Morgana got used to it.

"If you let me drive, they'll probably lower the insurance rates. Besides, I never could cook; seven people caught ptomaine at my last party, and the medical center just went batshit. Nobody's seen ptomaine for fifty years—they were even flying in specialists from Oregon to watch.

"All I'm good for is transistor systems," she grinned, letting them know that that was not quite all she was good for.

And that disgusted them all the more.

Oh, there were jokes in the lab about how Morgana got her results—she had a tendency to talk to her computers, and one of the technicians swore the manual she was writing began "take the fur of a newly skinned toad," but there weren't any jokes about the results. Morgana was reliable. If she'd plotted the entry coordinates to Heaven somewhere in the Van Allen Belt, the Center would have funded a special expedition.

Then, too, the last computer she'd designed, a four-cell transistor base whose memory banks could be expanded indefinitely, had just about written her ticket on this flight. It took up about as much room as the control panel on the one it had replaced. Purse-sized, she called it, when she happened to be around Bill Henderson, male chauvinist and half-serious arch enemy bent on keeping deep-space exploration a man's world. But, as Morgana reminded the Flight Center, not only could she build a four-cell, she could fix it. She could probably even build another one out of spare eyebrow tweezers and melted-down earrings.

Nonetheless, the Flight Center was uneasy. For one thing, as

Henderson had pointed out to the captain when the crew was appointed, Morgana had breasts.

The captain had been businesslike enough to allow her to be there to defend herself.

This mission, Henderson had said, was a scientific expedition into deep space, the first to go outside the local system, and he felt the captain should be aware of what would happen if there were breasts aboard.

Thinking back, Morgana wasn't really sure whether he had said breasts aboard or a broad aboard. Probably he'd said both.

Morgana had smiled at him.

"Bill, just what do you think is going to happen if there aren't any breasts aboard?"

You strong, silent, lone spaceman types piss me off, she thought. Proud of your public independence and beating off in the cockpit four hours a day, then whoring when you hit port and treating women in general like plumbing fixtures.

Morgana was definitely out of the dewey-faced *femme fatale* class. Her dark hair was beginning to grey; her face was intelligent and sensitive, but hardly beautiful. No journalist, had it occurred to any journalist to write about her, could have called her either statuesque for the ladies' section or ripe for the pulps. Her body was muscular and sensibly proportioned, and she did very little to create any illusions about herself.

Somehow that did not stop her from what Henderson had called reeking of sex.

Presumably any female barricaded behind forty light-years of deep space with six crewmen would have reeked a bit of sex, recreation space being what it is on extraterrestrial vehicles.

Still, in ordinary circumstances, Morgana was hardly likely to qualify as a first-rate distraction. She dressed simply, mostly in white spun-vinyl tunics and soft vinyl stockingboots. She was drawn more to aesthetic comfort than to the extravagant forms of body ornamentation affected by her secretaries in the Computer Research Center, which tended to make such actions as walking or sitting fairly complicated.

In short, as Henderson put it, Morgana was a rampant feminist.

Just as society felt it could safely announce that it had reached the rare heights of egalitarianism, that it had at long last, separated people's real abilities from their careless sexualities, up popped Morgana Daen to point out that it hadn't, really.

The Director of the Concomitant Forces had once remarked on the fact.

"Morgana, if you had lived a hundred or so years ago, we might even have had women enlisted in the regular army."

"Certainly. And there would have been large-scale infiltration of women officers on both sides, and in about six months we would have worked out some decent trade agreements, and changed the arms race into competitive consumerism. Consumerism may be deadly coercive, but there seems to me to be an obvious advantage in consuming mint-flavored contraceptives instead of munitions."

The director had walked away in disgust.

"Thank God we went into space instead," he had muttered.

It was Morgana's private opinion that women, had they seen the sense of organizing, could have gotten man into space in about half the time it had taken the director's predecessors, simply by convincing men that space was *the* place to retire. But that was neither here nor there.

Morgana had made it in the man's world of her choice.

As though a male researcher, hampered and protected by a spacesuit was any better off on an alien planet than a female researcher, also hampered and protected by a spacesuit.

Morgana's movements pitched her slowly toward the white vinyl-padded ceiling of the liftoff chamber; the *Olgaddanea* was not equipped with a gravitational field outside the lab. Working her body along the ceiling like a fish, she slipped into the gravity lock.

The rest of the crew had specific post-liftoff readings and adjustments to make before they would have any data for Morgana to feed the four-cell, so she got first crack at the lab to do her physiological data checkout.

Before liftoff, the crew had been inoculated against all computable variations of extra-terrestrial stress. It had all been Bedders' idea, using the four-cell to do stress probabilities and inoculate. Bedders was the chief biochemist in Intergalactic Research at the Space Center; he was also ship's doctor and an insufferable prick. The physiological data checkouts he had devised to keep tabs on the efficiency of his vaccine took so long that the crew had begun joking about prescribed activity therapy. Evidently extra-terrestrial stress didn't include boredom, so Bedders was taking care of that in his own way.

Feeling comfortably solid in the gravitational field, Morgana pulled out the check equipment and wondered what could possibly show up in a crew inoculated against everything from virus infections to vitamin deficiencies.

It took her about half an hour to begin tabulating results. Some discrepancies irritated her, and she had to run several of the tests again to confirm her results.

They confirmed.

Morgana was discrepant.

Forgetting the gravity lock, she

shot out of the lab and went flying through the tube right into Henderson. Elbowing him out of her way, she managed to get into the control center.

Bedders was leaning over a graphing screen with Wilcox and Hallwether.

"Dr. Bedders," she said, as grimly calm as possible, "I'd like to speak to you."

Henderson stuck his head back into the cockpit.

"Anything we can't all know, Miss Daen? Trying to get Bedders alone or something?" he sneered.

Morgana started to red out and held onto a walkstrap.

"Actually, I think you should be the first to know, Bill, you take such pleasure in bad news."

She turned to Bedders.

"Your anti-stress vaccination nullified my contraceptive. Not only am I the first woman in deep space, I am also the first pregnant woman in deep space, and I'd like you to begin working on what to do about it."

Bedders' face didn't register for a minute.

Henderson snorted.

"Always have to be the center of attention, don't you, Morgana?"

Bedders went white.

"Are you absolutely sure?" he asked.

"I told them it was crazy, sending a broad; now we've done a whole fucking three billion dollar liftoff for nothing."

"Henderson, just shut up for once," she snapped. "Or I'll name you the father."

"You don't have a license."

"Neither do you."

Bedders recovered.

"Wilcox, will you and the captain reschedule the lab tests for the next two hours? I'm going to need it. Miss Daen, will you come with me, please?"

Morgana followed Jake Bedders into the lab.

"I won't even begin to try to apologize for this, Miss Daen, but . . ."

"I wouldn't even care if you did. You got me pregnant; now just get me unpregnant. I can live without the apologies."

It took her a second to realize that he had taken her remark seriously.

He was shocked.

"Relax. I'm not impugning your chastity; I know you're a Neo-Puritan. I got myself pregnant; you just bolixed my contraceptive the week before I put on the first intergalactic and didn't bother to tell me."

"It didn't occur to me. Evidently the chemically induced state of false pregnancy induced by your particular contraceptive was a form of stress. It didn't occur to your computer, either, I might add."

"Wrong. It occurred to my computer, and the computer fixed it; it just didn't occur to the com-

puter that we wouldn't be aware of it. Insofar as things can occur to a computer, that is."

Morgana sat tentatively on one of the lab tables.

"Can you reinoculate me somehow and cause a miscarriage?"

"Not without reversing your primary inoculation and exposing you to massive sepsis."

"Either that or triplets. I hope you don't feel offended that my faith is somewhat shaken.

"We'll just have to resort to forceps or something," Morgana went on.

Bedders face went blotchy and purple.

"Miss Daen, this is an area of biology with which I am almost totally unfamiliar. This is hardly the sort of unexpected event for which I was trained; I'm afraid, in view of your attitude, that I will simply have to depend on the Center for instructions."

Bedders turned and retreated through the gravity lock to control, leaving Morgana perched in disgust on the black lab table.

Great, she thought. Just great. Champion of feminism, egalitarianism, efficiency—and my ovaries have to fuck up the first manned intergalactic probe. Jesus! The gravity lock hissed and Wilcox, the radiologist, came grin-first into the lab.

"Congratulations, Morgana; you've just put us four degrees off course and messed up the control room worse than an attack of the Green Slime. You ought to see Henderson."

"Lay off it, Marty. I don't want to see Henderson. He's right. I messed up. It may have been Bedders' fault, but I seem to be left holding the bag, as it were."

"It's not going to do much to assure Personnel that women are the greatest thing that ever hit space. Who was it, Ana?"

"Nobody you know," she snapped.

Wilcox shrugged.

"Just curious. I guess it is a sort of a tabu question or something, but it isn't every day one of my colleagues gets pregnant, for Chrissake."

"Well, I won't be for long."

"You don't have a license, either, I bet," he grinned at her.

"Of course I don't have a license; what did you think, that I'd taken it up as a hobby to get me through the long winter nights? I've got better things to do on my long winter nights."

"Just wondered. Had your genotype analyzed?"

"Lord, no!"

He shrugged.

"Well, you never know."

"I know. I don't have a license, and I never had my genotype checked. What do you mean, you never know?"

"I mean that from what I heard back in the control room, nobody's going back, nobody's even sure if

specifications packed forceps, and Bedders keeps yelling that a chemically induced abortion would have to be done with sphenomatazine, which would destroy the lifetime supply of oil-soluble vitamins you were shot full of to come on this trip, and probably kill you by inducing a massive sepsis. And the four-cell goes with you, which leaves us without a computer."

"I didn't think all this interest was brotherly love, but you might make out with the manual. What does ground control say about it?"

"I don't know. They hadn't said anything when I left. I made contact and left the dialogue to the rest of them. Bedders was yelling about vitamins, Henderson was screaming something incoherent about breasts, and the captain was trying to talk over all the noise as though nothing had happened."

"I can hear it now. *'Olgaddanea,* Captain Trysson here, sir. We seem to have a problem on board. No, sir, the ship runs beautifully. Yessir, we're all well, so to speak. The trouble is, sir, the computer expert you sent us is pregnant. And she doesn't have a license, sir, and we were wondering . . .'" she mimicked.

"And Phil and Hallwether are sitting at the control panel laughing hysterically."

Morgana shook her head.

"I don't blame them; three billion dollars, they get us up, and what happens?"

"We could write it up as a stowaway."

"Right. There isn't going to be anything to write up."

"I don't know; the captain isn't going back, and Bedders isn't coming near you."

Morgana blanched.

"Don't you think making me walk the plank is going to be a little impractical in deep space?"

"Especially if you take the computer. Isn't there anything you can do?"

"*Do?* I keep telling you, I'm not licensed to be a mother; I don't know anything about it at all. I've had my shot every May ninth since I was twelve. What am I supposed to *do*?"

"Now calm down, girl, nobody's going to hassle you any more than he has to. I just asked if there weren't something you could do. I remind you, I'm a man. I know nothing at all about motherhood and all that sort of thing. For all I know, women go around collecting bits of trivia on that subject like any other. I just thought you might have picked up some information somewhere, just out of curiosity. Being a woman, I mean . . ."

"I'm not a reproductive, I never wanted to be, it's outside my specialization, and I never wanted to know about it particularly."

"I said calm down. If you don't know, you don't know, and that's that. If worse comes to worst, we

can put it into suspended animation until we get back and slip it into the nurseries then. It won't take up that much room."

Morgana stared.

"You mean—have it?"

"I mean don't worry about it. The Center will come up with something."

"It looks like they better before I do. I wonder . . . when I was about fifteen, I went on a Victorian novel kick, and I remember reading how shamed ladies used to drink a quart of gin and soak in a scalding bath. But this isn't the nineteenth century, shame is passé, gin is obsolete, and where the hell would I get a hot bath out here? Can't you just see us requesting that Henderson stay out of the lab while I soak my ass in a lab sink? Do you know how long it takes to heat fifteen gallons of water over a Bunson burner? And even then, you don't suppose I could synthesize a quart of fermented algae—do algae ferment?"

"You're getting hysterical."

"I'm getting a hysterectomy the minute we hit port again."

"By then you ought to be out of danger. Besides, that won't help us now."

The gravity lock hissed open and Jim Hallwether stuck his head into the lab.

"Excuse me, I just came back to see—"

"Come on in. We were just discussing whether or not I should leave the computer manual and walk the plank. Think you could find us a plank, Jim?"

"Don't mind her, she's just never been a mother before."

Morgana began to laugh.

Hallwether stared at them.

"It's the Center," he said finally. "They want to know if you've ever had your genotype analyzed."

"Tell the Center that Personnel has the most complete file ever assembled on me right in the next building, and nowhere does it mention my ever having been so taken in by the motherhood myth as to ever let any cunt-struck imbecile get his oily hands within a good hard yard of my genotype. And while you're talking to them, ask them why!"

"Well, the State Department of Eugenics has contacted the Center about allowing the pregnancy to proceed."

"You mean this thing's gone that far?" Morgana gaped. "What do they want me to do? Have a baby on a seven-man spacecraft headed into hyperspace? They just want me to go and do it? Are they out of their minds?"

"You'll have to ask them."

"Great. I can see it now: I have it hanging from a hangstrap in the recreation room; Bedders can work macramé in the umbilical cord, and Henderson can catch the afterbirth in a plastic bag. If he's quick."

"Morgana?"

"Why?"

"They didn't say. Or they hadn't said when I came back here to get you. The captain might know by this time. You could ask him."

Morgana bolted off the lab table and made it into the control room in time to see the captain staring in disbelief at a blank telescreen.

"No," she said.

The captain swiveled to face her.

"I'm glad you're here. It seems I'm to congratulate you on the coming birth of the first infant in hyperspace."

"No," she said.

The captain sighed.

"I had a computer; that was enough."

"Not for the Department of Eugenics once they heard you were pregnant. It seems they've been unable to get any of their regular reproductives to go into zero gravity for a full term or some such thing. I don't understand. They feel it may have some marvelous consequence for the race. Then, too, I guess the kid would be a kind of biochemical record by the time we hit earth again."

"Oh. We won't have to raise it, then. No nursery under the energy banks, no diapers in the ultrasonic laundry—what does the Space Center have to say about all this, anything?"

The captain put his hand over his eyes tiredly.

"They think it's a fair idea, too, faced with the other alternatives."

"What other alternatives?"

"Nobody on this ship is willing to perform an abortion on you, Morgana. We could take a chance at it chemically and risk killing you, which would be impractical. We could allow it to be born and kill the infant, which wouldn't be particularly good for our public image."

"Not if the Humane Society still exists," Morgana agreed caustically.

"We can go home."

"No."

"That's what the Space Center said."

"Tell them I need a license."

"Eugenics gives the licenses. If they tell you to have a baby, that's it. You're a licensed reproductive."

"Just like that."

"Just like that, up here. They handle the paperwork on that end."

He looked down at the spool of microtape in his hand.

"Morgana, about the father . . ."

"What about the father?"

"Eugenics wants both your genotypes in case there are any corrections to be made."

"I'm afraid that's impossible."

"We'll have to have his name and identifications; he need never know if you want it that way."

Morgana shook her head.

"Morgana, I realize that this is asking a lot of you, but under the circumstances, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to cooperate."

Morgana didn't say anything.

The captain looked at her closely.

"You do . . . know the father, don't you?"

"I've met him," Morgana snapped.

"In that case, is there any particular reason for your reluctance?"

"I don't remember his name."

"You don't remember—?"

One of the captain's eyebrows raised about a quarter of an inch.

"I'm not even sure I asked him."

"I see."

"No, you don't see at all. But that doesn't matter. I don't know anything about him except the way he looks and several other idiosyncrasies that probably wouldn't help you find him."

"I see."

"I liked it that way."

"Did he know who you were?"

"I don't know. I never asked him. Why, are you going to advertise? Flash a picture of me through the earth media with a caption: 'Will this woman's lover please apply to the Space Center for testing?' Do you have any idea what would happen?"

Phil Bosner looked up from his control panel.

"I think we can avoid that, sir," he said, looking directly at the captain. "I think we can put her on the retinograph under light hypnosis, causing her to relive her last . . . visual contact with him. We can record the chemical pattern that will repeat itself in her retina and construct a photograph from the recreated image."

The captain stared at Bosner, waiting for him to finish.

Bosner thought he had finished, but after a second he got nervous and went on.

"It's part of the data-gathering equipment Research sent through just before liftoff. We weren't sure we could get it finished in time for the conjunction, so it wasn't included in the specifications. It got here about an hour before we did, sir."

Something that might have been called an expression flickered across the captain's face, though what it expressed was best known to the captain.

"Well, I hope Research remembered to bolt it down," he said finally.

"Would you mind telling me what we're going to use it for—besides paternity proofs, that is? I mean, you didn't just pack it on a hunch, did you?"

"It was designed as a kind of—objectifier, Morgana. To study the transition of data from stimulus to verbal construct. You see, in the case of photography, not only are

the photographs sometimes too blurred or inadequate for research, but they don't always tell the whole story. They do tell—if they're good—what chemical reaction the lens caught at the moment the shutter was tripped. Human beings have a number of other senses that may in some ways sharpen or dull perception; hence they may either perceive more or believe they do. This gadget helps us check on what was actually perceived by a given human being at a given time."

Bosner had the floor, and he didn't want it, and no one would take it. Morgana was staring at him grimly.

"Bosner," she said, "you are the most technologically sophisticated voyeur it has ever been my pleasure to meet."

"W-we hope to learn something about perceptual bias . . ." he stammered.

Bosner was a sparse, blond systems analyst. At sixty, he would still be a sparse, blond systems analyst. At night, in bed with a woman, he was still a sparse, blond systems analyst. But he had a strong sense of identity.

Possibly the purple-belted lavender bodysuit made him look a little more sparse, a little less colorful. Perhaps lavender was not Bosner's color, but the preference had not shown up on the preflight preference exams.

And if he had cared very much, something would have shown up and Design would have done something about it.

Anyway, if Phil hadn't liked purple, he could have said something.

Morgana slipped into hypnosis easily, from long practice, even with the binocular encumbrance of the retinograph fastened like a sleepmask to her skull. The last thing she remembered before dropping off was thinking that her eyes must have looked like embedded tarantulas. The shallow hum of the machine produced a small but merciful amount of white noise against the eerie silence of space.

"You see, sir," Bosner was explaining, "under the hypnotic stimulus, we can recreate in the retina any specific infrared pattern reaction. . . ."

"Bosner," the captain said tiredly, "Phil, what happens if he doesn't really look the way Morgana sees him?"

"That's one of the things the retinograph is for, comparison of mental with photographic records. Then, when we get the pattern, we feed it into these camera packs; when the response is monitored . . . we'll track him down, sir," Bosner assured the captain nervously.

The captain studied the sound- and shock-proofing of the compartment.

"Bosner, can you transmit the

picture directly back to the Center?"

"Yes, yes, I think so, sir."

"Well, do it. We'll be on this ship for forty years at a minimum; no need to pry deeper into each other than we have to."

"I'll need Wilcox to transmit, sir."

"Sure. Wilcox."

Wilcox was watching Morgana sway in the oversized control chair. He'd known her a long time, all through flight school, from freak to fixture at the flight center, as she'd once said. It was hard to imagine this happening to her; he even felt a little pleased. Morgana Daen, professional flaunting bitch with her feelings so far below the surface they were probably bituminous by now, Morgana Daen brought low. Or embarrassed, anyway. Good old Anglo-Saxon word, to embare the ass. Marty grinned. It was hard to imagine Morgana with a man, needing anyone, even physically, Morgana without her name, without her credentials, without her computers. Maybe she wasn't so hard if she needed time away from herself like everyone else.

Impressions that could ball up communications for centuries, Marty thought, grinning that he was so profound. After all, he thought, where would we be if we understood each other?

"Wilcox, can you broadcast this?"

"Yessir."

The retinoscreen flashed into the computer at the Central Data Bank. The feminine cards were eliminated immediately, dark-haired individuals next, freckles and moles dropped out another segment. Thickness of eyebrows, width of nose, distance between tear ducts eliminated another hundred million.

Forty-three seconds later the machine spat out six files, complete with genotype and credit ratings, all of which it claimed belonged to Morgana's lover.

Take your pick.

The processors at the Data Bank couldn't decide.

The Directors at the Department of Eugenics couldn't decide.

The files and contents were flashed back to the *Olgaddanea*, where Morgana quickly eliminated the last five and read the remaining file intently.

"I thought you didn't want to know who he was."

"Marty, I'll probably never see him again. By the time I get back he'll have died. I'm just curious about a man who pleased me very much."

"Surprised?"

"A little. I never cared for administratives. He seems to have been one."

Bedders came into the control room behind them.

"Miss Daen, I've completed the preparation for your genotypal

analysis and correction. I think I ought to tell you . . . even under hypnosis it can be unpleasant."

"It doesn't do anything to *me*, does it? I mean, I come out of this Morgana Daen, with no helpful suggestions and improvements from you?"

"No personality change is indicated, and no tissues will undergo any change outside the fetus itself."

"That's a relief. All I need now is an identity crisis with another identity."

The captain stifled a yawn and realized that he and the crew had been awake nearly twenty hours. Morgana grinned at him.

"Bored, sir?"

The captain assumed an air of gallantry.

"No, Morgana, just tired and rather overwhelmed. The enormity of the whole thing hasn't hit yet, I suppose. I wasn't prepared for this in flight school. Aliens, yes; even the Green Slime; infants we hadn't figured on for the present," he joked ruefully.

"Well, Captain I'm comforted to know that we are unprepared together. Morale and all that."

Bedders coughed.

"The apparatus is set up in the lab, Miss Daen. I'm sorry we couldn't give you some sort of drug . . ."

"Oh, that's all right, Jake. God knows what would happen if he gave me some sort of drug."

Hallwether snickered.

Just then something crashed into a hard surface somewhere near the speaker system in the lab. Another crash and an indistinct howl of rage drowned instatic as the intercom went out all over the ship.

The gravity lock hissed open and Wilcox somersaulted gently into control, laughing like the proverbial demented fetus.

Righting himself on a hangstrap, he swung around to face the captain.

"Captain, sir, it's Henderson," he managed before he balled up into laughter again.

"What's the matter, Wilcox? What about Henderson?"

"He's got the bubonic plague?" Morgana asked hopefully.

"Well, he wants to see Bedders, sir. It was the inoculations, we think."

"He's back there changing sex or something?"

"Morgana, I'm trying to tell you," Wilcox gasped for breath. "Bedders shot us all so full of antistress that he's discovered a side effect."

Bedders went scarlet.

"Unless we find another explanation, we have to accept the fact that Henderson's reaction to section B-3 of the checkout sheds doubt on Morgana's condition."

He grinned at Morgana, who didn't know what he was talking about.

"Marty, what are you talking about?"

"It seems, my dear, that Henderson is pregnant."

The crowd in the control room stared at Wilcox.

"Wilcox, Henderson is a man. I've roomed with him," Hallwether objected.

"Obviously. The Space Center would hardly have missed a thing like that."

"Well, then?"

"Well, then, Morgana isn't pregnant. And Bedders has us all shot so full of progesterone—or something like that, the chemical end is his problem—that we, none of us, could pass a pregnancy test if we had to."

Wilcox still hung on the hangstrap, grinning.

The captain turned wearily to the blank telescreen behind him.

"Bedders," he said. "Wilcox, the Space Center has made emergency adjustments. They have faced adverse and ridiculous publicity."

He turned back.

"I hope they aren't going to be disappointed," he said.

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THE THALASSOGENS

by Isaac Asimov

COCKTAIL PARTIES BRING OUT THE WORST in me in the way of self-righteousness, for I don't drink.

This isn't a question of morality, you understand. It's just that I don't particularly like the taste of liquor and that even small quantities induce blotches and shortness of breath. Anyway, without ever touching a drop, I can be as hilariously drunk as anyone in the room—and no hangovers afterward.

The only trouble is that people won't let it go at that. They stand around and hound me. "Are you *sure* you won't have something?" they ask for the fifteenth time.

What's more, when I do get thirsty, I have to go over to the bartender, make sure no one is listening, and then ask in a stage-whisper if I can have some water.

First, I have to convince him that I really want water. Then I have to persuade him that I want a large glass without ice. I generally fail. Not listening, he picks out a cocktail glass and hands me water-on-the-rocks, which means I have about five cubic centimeters of fluid and must then stand there, moodily, swirling ice-cubes and wishing they would melt.

It's no wonder I get nasty. The other evening at a cocktail party one of those present was inveighing against marijuana. "Ninety-two percent of heroin users," he said, "began with pot."

I was on his side, actually, for I am against the use of drugs, but I eyed the glass of liquor he was holding and said, "Are you a social drinker?"

"Of course," he said,

"Well," said I, "every single alcoholic who ever existed began as a social drinker."

Anyway, there is nothing wrong with water. It's a great beverage and a very unusual substance in addition.

For instance, the six most common elements in the Universe as a whole are thought to be hydrogen, helium, oxygen, neon, nitrogen and carbon in that order. Out of every ten thousand atoms in the Universe about 9200 are hydrogen, 790 are helium, 5 are oxygen, 2 are neon, 2 are nitrogen and 1 is carbon. All the rest make up an insignificant scattering and for many purposes can be simply ignored.

With this information on hand, we can ask ourselves what the most common compound (*i.e.*, a substance with a molecule made up of two or more different kinds of atoms) in the Universe is. It stands to reason that the most common compound would be one with a small, very stable molecule made up of atoms of the two most common elements.

Since helium atoms don't form parts of any molecules at all, that leaves hydrogen and oxygen as the most common compound-forming elements in the universe. It so happens that two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom form a very stable molecule (H_2O) and that happens to be water.

We can safely conclude, then, that water is the most common compound in the Universe. That in itself is surely a distinction.

Naturally, water wouldn't be common everywhere. It doesn't exist at all in any normal star, of course. In all but the very coolest stars, the temperature is such that no compound, indeed no molecule, can exist.

On worlds that are cool, but quite small, water molecules wouldn't exist because they would be too light and flitting to be held by the feeble gravitational force. Some might be held by chemical forces to the rocky crust, but if the world were hot, even that would fail. It is not surprising, then, that the Moon, Mars and undoubtedly Mercury, are relatively dry.

On giant planets such as Jupiter and Saturn, where the gravitational field is intense and the temperature is low, there is a much more representative sampling of the material of the Universe, and I strongly suspect that water is by far the most common compound on such worlds.

Earth stands in an intermediate position. It is small enough and warm enough to have lost most of the water it might have possessed at the start. More likely, it failed to gather most of it in the first place out of the swirling cloud of dust and gas from which the planet formed. Even so, water on Earth is extremely plentiful.

In fact, in two respects, Earth's water is absolutely unique. In the first place, water is *by far* the most common liquid on Earth. Indeed, it

is the only liquid on Earth present in quantity. (What is in second place? Petroleum, perhaps.)

Secondly, water is the only substance on Earth present, in quantity, in all three phases, solid, liquid and gas. Not only is there an ocean full of water, but there are polar caps of miles-deep ice, and there is water vapor making up a major (if variable) part of the atmosphere.

The question, Gentle Readers, is this, then. Can any substance other than water serve? Can a planet exist with a large ocean of any substance other than water?

To answer that question, let's consider the requirements:

1) The ocean-substance must be a plentiful component of the Universe-mixture. We can imagine oceans of liquid mercury, or liquid fluorine or liquid carbon tetrachloride, but we can't realistically imagine any planet with these particular substances present in such quantities as to spread out into oceans.

2) The ocean-substance must have a prominent liquid phase. For instance, the Martian polar caps may well be frozen carbon dioxide, but there is no liquid carbon dioxide phase at Martian atmospheric pressure. The solid carbon dioxide vaporizes directly to gas, so there would be no carbon dioxide ocean even if there were enough carbon dioxide to form one.

3) Ideally, we would want a substance whose liquid phase could be transformed with reasonable ease to either solid or gas, if we are to make possible those properties of Earth's ocean which lead to ice-caps, clouds, rain and snow. Thus, an ocean of liquid gallium at the temperatures of water's boiling point, for instance, might produce gallium "ice-caps" with ease, but at that temperature, gallium's vapor pressure would be so low that there would be no gallium-vapor in the air to speak of, no gallium clouds, no gallium rain. On the other hand, if we had an ocean of liquid helium at a temperature of 2° above absolute zero (*i.e.*, 2° K.), there would be plenty of helium vapor in the atmosphere (indeed, that would make up almost all the atmosphere) and helium rain would be common, but there is likely to be no helium ice or snow because solid helium doesn't form, even at absolute zero, except under considerable pressure, and we would be hard put to design a planet with sufficient atmospheric pressure at 2° K. to do the job.

In considering the requirements, let's begin with the first, presence in oceanic quantities. For that, we had better work with the top six elements only: hydrogen, helium, oxygen, neon, nitrogen, and carbon. Any substance made up of anything but these six elements (singly or in combination) might have many virtues but would simply not be present

in sufficiently overwhelming a quantity to make up an ocean composed entirely or nearly entirely of itself.*

Of these six elements, two, helium and neon, can exist in elemental form only. A third, hydrogen, can form compounds, but exists in such overwhelming quantities that on any planet capable of collecting more than a trace of it (*i.e.*, on Jupiter, as opposed to Earth) it must exist mostly in elemental form for sheer lack of sufficient quantities of other elements with which to combine.

As for oxygen, nitrogen and carbon, these, in the presence of a vast preponderance of hydrogen, will exist only in combination with as much hydrogen as possible. Oxygen will exist as water (H_2O), nitrogen as ammonia (H_3N) and carbon as methane (H_4C). This gives us our list of the six possible thalassogens**: hydrogen, helium, water, neon, ammonia and methane, in order of decreasing quantity.

The next step is to consider each in connection with its liquid phase. At ordinary pressures, equivalent to that produced by Earth's atmosphere, each has a clear-cut boiling-point temperature, above which it exists only as a gas. This boiling point can be increased when pressure is increased, but let's ignore that complication, and consider the boiling point, in degrees above absolute zero, at ordinary pressure.

It turns out that the boiling points of helium, hydrogen and neon are, respectively, 4.2° K., 20.3° K., and 27.3° K.

But keep in mind that even distant Pluto has a surface temperature estimated to be roughly 60° K. In fact, I wonder if any sizable planet, such as the outer members of our Solar system, can ever have extremely low temperatures. Internal heat arising from radioactivity must be sufficient to keep the surface temperature at Plutonian levels, at least, even in the complete absence of any sun. (Jupiter, for instance, according to a very recent report I've seen, radiates three to four times as much heat as it receives fron the Sun.)

In short, then, for any reasonable planet we can design, the temperature is going to be too high for the presence, in quantity, of helium, hydrogen or neon in the liquid phase. Scratch them from the list and we have only three thalassogens left: methane, ammonia, and water.

And what are their boiling points? Why, respectively, 111.7° K., 239.8° K. and 373.2° K.

**There is one conceivable exception on an Earth-like planet. Silicon dioxide is present in oceanic quantities, but it is a solid and wouldn't be a liquid under anything but white-heat. Scratch silicon dioxide.*

***This is a word I have just made up. It is from Greek words ("sea-producers") and I define it as "a substance capable of forming a planetary ocean."*

If we consider these three, we come to these conclusions:

1) Water is the most common and is therefore the most likely to form an ocean.

2) Since methane is liquid across a range of 23 degrees, ammonia across 44 degrees, and water across 100 degrees, water, of the three, has by far the broadest temperature-range for the liquid phase and, in its ocean-forming propensities, is least sensitive to temperature deviation.

3) Most important of all, water forms its oceans at a higher temperature than the other two. You might expect methane oceans on a planet like Neptune or ammonia oceans on a planet like Jupiter. Only water, however, *only* water, could possibly form an ocean on an inner planet like Earth.

Well, then, we depend for the existence of our ocean, and therefore for the existence of life, on the fact that water happens to have its liquid range at a far higher temperature than that of any other possible thalassogen. Is that just the way the ball bounces or is there something interesting to be wrung out of the water molecule?

Let's see—

When atoms combine to form molecules, the bond between them is formed through a kind of tug of war over the outermost electrons in those atoms. In many cases, one type of atom has the capacity to hold on to one or two electrons over and above those it normally possesses. Given half a chance, it will grab on to such electrons. Since the atom itself is electrically neutral (positive charges in the interior balancing negative charges on the outskirts) and since every electron has a negative charge, an atom which is capable of taking on one or more additional electrons then carries a net negative charge. Elements made up of atoms capable of doing this are therefore characterized as "electronegative."

The most electronegative of the elements, by far, is fluorine. Following it, in order are oxygen, nitrogen, chlorine and bromine. These are the only strongly electronegative elements.

Some atoms, on the other hand, have no strong ability to latch on to additional electrons. Indeed, they find it difficult to hold on to the electrons they normally possess and have a considerable tendency to give up one or two. Given half a chance, they will do so. Once they lose such negatively charged electrons, what remains of the atom has a net positive charge. Such atoms are therefore "electropositive."

Most of the elements tend to be somewhat electropositive. The most

electropositive elements are the alkali metals, of which sodium and potassium are the most common representatives. Calcium, magnesium, aluminum and zinc are other examples of strongly electropositive elements.

When an electropositive element, like sodium, meets an electonegative one like chlorine, the sodium atom freely gives up an electron, which the chlorine atom as freely takes. What is left is a sodium atom with a positive charge (a sodium ion) and a chlorine atom with a negative charge (a chloride ion). The attraction between the two ions is the strong pull of an electromagnetic force, and this is called "electrovalence." A number of chloride ions cluster around each sodium ion, and a number of sodium ions cluster around each chloride ion. The result is an intricate and very orderly array of ions that hang on to each other tightly.

The commonest way of pulling ions apart is to use heat. All ions, no matter how firmly held in place by some sort of attraction, are vibrating about that place. This vibration is related to temperature. The higher the temperature, the more energetic the vibration. If the temperature is high enough, the vibration becomes violent enough to pull the ions apart, however strong the electromagnetic force between them, and the substance then melts. (In the liquid phase, the ions are no longer held firmly in place and they move about freely.)

Nevertheless the temperature, by ordinary standards, must be quite high before the strong attractions between the sodium ions and the chloride ions can be overcome. Sodium chloride (ordinary table salt) has the comparatively high melting point, therefore, of 1074° K. (For orientation, a pleasant spring day with the temperature at 70° F. is at 294° K.)

Still higher temperatures are required to pull the ions apart altogether and send them in pairs (one sodium ion and one chloride ion) into the nearly total independence of the gas phase, so that the boiling point of sodium chloride is 1686° K.

This is more or less true of all electrovalent compounds which form by the transfer of one or more electrons from one atom to another. Molybdenum oxide has a melting point of 2893° K. and a boiling point of 5070° K.

What happens, though, when one electropositive element meets another. Sodium atoms, for instance, can form bonds among themselves by allowing the outermost electron each possesses (and which they hold on to only very loosely) to be shared among them all. This is a stabler situation than would exist if each were responsible for its own out-

ermost electron only as in sodium gas. Consequently sodium atoms cling together and sodium is a solid at ordinary temperatures. To be sure, it doesn't take much to pull the atoms apart, and sodium melts at a temperature of 370° K. just under that of boiling water. It doesn't boil, though, and obtain complete atomic independence till 1153° K.

(Those outermost electrons wander easily from atom to atom. Their existence accounts for the fact that sodium, and metals generally, conduct heat and electricity so much better than non-metals.)

Metals made up of less electropositive atoms get together more snugly, and some of them end up by forming bonds as tight as those of any electrovalent compound. Tungsten metal has a melting point of 3640° K. and a boiling point of 6150° K.

Yet though metallic atoms fit together well, there is a greater tendency for them to transfer electrons to the electronegative atoms, particularly to oxygen, which is by far the most common of all the strongly electronegative elements. For this reason, there is virtually no free metal in the Earth's crust.*

In general, then, we can say that metals and electrovalent compounds are so high-melting as to offer no chance of a liquid phase at any reasonable planetary temperature, up to and including that of Mercury. Those few which might (like sodium metal or tin tetrachloride) cannot possibly be present in large enough quantity to form an ocean.

So we must look for something else. What happens if one electronegative atom meets another? What happens if one fluorine atom meets another, for instance? Each of the fluorine atoms can handle one electron over and above its usual assignment, but neither is in a position to give up one of its own in order to satisfy the other. What does happen is that each atom allows the other a share in one of its own electrons. There is a two-electron pool to which each contributes and in which each shares. Both fluorine atoms are then satisfied.

In order for this pool to exist, though, the two fluorine atoms must remain at close quarters! To pull them apart takes a lot of effort, for it means breaking up that two-electron pool. Consequently, under ordinary circumstances, fluorine in elementary form exists in molecules made up of atom-pairs (F_2). The temperature must rise well over 1300° K. even to begin to break up the fluorine molecule and shake the individual atoms apart. The attraction between atoms represented by

**Earth has a metallic core because it contains so much iron that there just aren't enough electronegative atoms to take care of it all. The metallic excess, denser than the oxygen-containing electrovalent compounds, settled to the Earth's center in the soft, youthful days of the planet.*

shared electrons is called a "covalent bond."

Two fluorine atoms, once they have formed their two-electron pool, have no reason to share any electrons with any other atom, much less transfer electrons to them or even receive electrons from them. The two-electron pool completely satisfies their electron needs. Consequently, when one fluorine molecule meets another fluorine molecule, they bounce off each other with very little tendency to stick together.

If there were no tendency to stick together at all, the fluorine molecule would remain independent of its neighbors however far down the temperature might drop. The molecules would move more and more sluggishly, bounce off one another more and more feebly, but they would never stick.

However, there are what are called "van der Waals forces" named for the Dutch chemist who first studied them. Without going into the matter in detail we can simply say that there are weak attractive forces between atoms or molecules even when there is no outright electron-transfer or electron-sharing.

Thanks to van der Waals forces, fluorine molecules are slightly sticky, and if the temperature drops low enough, the energy that keeps them moving will not be great enough to make them break away after colliding. Fluorine will condense to a liquid.

The boiling point of liquid fluorine is 85° K. If the temperature drops further still, the fluorine molecules lock firmly into an orderly array and fluorine becomes a solid. The melting point of solid fluorine is 50° K.

The same thing happens with the other electronegative elements. Chlorine, oxygen, and nitrogen also form electron pools between two atoms. We therefore have chlorine molecules, oxygen molecules and nitrogen molecules, each made up of atom-pairs (Cl_2, O_2 and N_2). Even hydrogen atoms, which are not particularly electronegative, form molecules by pairs (H_2).

In every case the melting and boiling points are low, with the exact value depending on the strength of the van der Waals forces. Hydrogen, with its very small atoms, possesses a liquid range at a considerably lower temperature than that of fluorine. The boiling point of liquid hydrogen is 21° K. and the freezing point of solid hydrogen is 14° K.

A few varieties of atom happen to possess a satisfactory number of electrons to begin with. They have little tendency to give up any electrons they have and still less to accept additional electrons from outside. They do not therefore tend to form compounds. These are the so-called "noble gases."

There are six of these altogether and, of them, the three with the largest atoms can form compounds (not very stable ones) with the most electronegative elements, such as fluorine and oxygen. The three with the smallest atoms, argon, neon and helium (in order of decreasing size), won't do even that much under any conditions yet discovered. Nor will they form electron pools among themselves. They remain in sullen isolation as individual atoms.

Yet they, too, experience the mutual attraction of van der Waals forces and, if cooled sufficiently, become liquids. The smaller the atom, the smaller the forces and the more strongly cooled they must be to liquefy. Helium, with the smallest atoms of the noble gases, experiences such small attractions that of all known substances it is most difficult to liquefy. The boiling point of liquid helium is phenomenally low, only 4.2° K. Solid helium doesn't exist at all, even at 0° K. (absolute zero) except under considerable pressure.

So far, though, these gaseous substances I have discussed that are covalent in nature, and that have liquid ranges far down the temperature scale, are all elements—elements that either exist in the form of isolated atoms, as in the case of helium, or as isolated two-atom molecules, as in the case of hydrogen.

Is it possible for molecules of two different atoms to be covalent in nature and to be low-melting and low-boiling?—Yes, it is!

Consider carbon. The carbon atom is neither strongly electropositive nor strongly electronegative. It has a tendency to form two-electron pools with each of four other atoms. It could form those pools with four other carbon atoms, each of which can form pools with three others, each of which with still three others, and so on indefinitely. In the end, uncounted trillions of carbon atoms may be sticking firmly together by way of strong covalent bonds. The result is that carbon has a higher melting point than that of any other known substance—nearly 4000° K.

But the carbon atom may form a two-electron pool with each of four different hydrogen atoms. The hydrogen atoms can only form one two-electron pool apiece, and so that ends it. The entire molecule consists of a carbon atom surrounded by four hydrogen atoms (H_4C) and this is methane.

Methane molecules have little attraction for each other except by way of weak van der Waals forces. The boiling point of liquid methane is 112° K., and the melting point of solid methane is 89° K.

Similarly, a carbon atom can form a molecule with one oxygen atom. This would be carbon monoxide (CO). Its boiling point and melting point are, respectively, 83° K. and 67° K.

Now we can come to a general conclusion. Unlike metallic substances and electrovalent compounds, covalent compounds have low melting points and boiling points, and only they can conceivably be thalassogens at reasonable planetary temperatures.

This gives us our first answer as to why water is a thalassogen at all; it is a covalent compound essentially. All right, that's something to begin with. Yet so many covalent compounds are, if anything, liquid at too low a range for planetary purposes and certainly for Earthly purposes specifically. Why is liquid water so warm then?

One possibility rests in the fact that, in general, the larger the covalent atom or molecule, the stronger the van der Waals force and the higher the boiling point. Consider the following table in which the size of the molecule is measured by its molecular weight (or, in the case of helium and neon, atomic weight).

Substance	*Atomic or Molecular Weight*	*Boiling Point* (° K)
Hydrogen (H_2)	2	17
Helium (He)	4	4
Neon (Ne)	20	27
Nitrogen (N_2)	28	77
Carbon Monoxide (CO)	28	83
Oxygen (O_2)	32	90
Fluorine (F_2)	38	85
Oxygen Fluoride (OF_2)	54	138
Nitrogen Fluoride (NF_3)	71	153
Chlorine (Cl_2)	71	239
Pentane (C_5H_{12})	72	309
Chlorine Heptoxide (Cl_2O_7)	183	355

The table isn't perfect, for helium, which has a larger atomic weight than hydrogen's molecular weight, nevertheless has a lower boiling point than hydrogen. Then, too, fluorine, which has a larger molecule than oxygen has, is nevertheless lower-boiling. Still, the table seems to show that there is a kind of rough and ready relationship between molecular weight and boiling point in the case of covalent compounds.

We might conclude, therefore, that water, which has a boiling point at 373, ought to have a molecular weight somewhat higher, or at least

not particularly lower, than chlorine heptoxide. Its molecular weight ought to be, say, 180, as a minimum.

Except that it isn't. The molecular weight of water is 18, just one-tenth what it "ought" to be.

Something, obviously, is terribly wrong—or right, perhaps, for it is to whatever causes this anomaly that we owe our life-giving ocean. What that wrongness/rightness might be we'll go into next month.

UNFINISHED STORY

As he left the blazing summer heat outside the Warlock's cave, the visiting sorceror sighed with pleasure. "Warlock, how can you keep the place so cool? The mana in this region has decreased to the point where magic is nearly impossible."

The Warlock smiled—and so did the unnoticeable young man who was sorting the Warlock's parchments in a corner of the cave. The Warlock said, "I used a very *small* demon, Harlaz. He was generated by a simple, trivial spell. His intelligence is low—fortunately, for his task is a dull one. He sits at the entrance to this cave and prevents the fast-moving molecules of air from entering and the slow-moving molecules from leaving. The rest he lets pass. Thus the cave remains cool."

"That's marvelous, Warlock! I suppose the process can be reversed in winter?"

"Of course."

"Ingenious."

"Oh, I didn't think of it," the Warlock said hastily. "Have you met my clerk? It was his idea." The Warlock raised his voice. "Oh, Maxwell

—LARRY NIVEN

For a more conventional discussion of Maxwell's demon, see Isaac Asimov's "The Modern Demonology," F&SF, January 1962.

Robert Aickman is an Englishman who is interested, among other things, in opera (former chairman of London Opera Society), British waterways (founder of Inland Waterways Association) and psychical research (author of THE HAUNTING OF BORLEY RECTORY*). Several collections of his supernatural fiction have been published in England, but in the U. S., he has been limited to two anthology appearances; the first was called "a corker" by our man in the dark corner, Gahan Wilson (F&SF, April 1969). In our October 1970 issue, Mr. Wilson, praising Aickman's latest collection,* SUB ROSA *(Gollancz), made a point of asking why Aickman was not better known in this country. After reading some of Aickman's fiction, we're quite willing to echo the question and to help alleviate it by offering the good story below.*

THE SCHOOL FRIEND

by Robert Aickman

IT WOULD BE FALSE MODESTY to deny that Sally Tessler and I were the bright girls of the school. Later it was understood that I went more and more swiftly to the bad, but Sally continued being bright for some considerable time. Like many males, but few females, even among those inclined to scholarship, Sally combined a true love for the classics, the ancient ones, with an insight into mathematics which, to the small degree that I was interested, seemed to me almost magical. She won three scholarships, two gold medals, and a sojourn among the Hellenes with all expenses paid. Before she had graduated she had published a little book of popular mathematics which, I understood, made her a surprising sum of money. Later she edited several lesser Latin authors, published in editions so small that they can have brought her nothing but inner satisfaction.

The foundations of all this eru-

dition had almost certainly been laid in Sally's earliest childhood. The tale went that Dr. Tessler had once been the victim of some serious injustice, or considered he had: certainly it seemed to be true that, as his neighbors put it, he "never went out." Sally herself once told me that she not only could remember nothing of her mother, but had never come across any trace or record of her. From the very beginning Sally had been brought up, it was said, by her father alone. Rumor suggested that Dr. Tessler's regimen was threefold: reading, domestic drudgery, and obedience. I deduced that he used the last to enforce the two first: when Sally was not scrubbing the floor or washing up, she was studying Vergil and Euclid. Even then I suspected that the doctor's ways of making his will felt would not have borne examination by the other parents. Certainly, however, when Sally first appeared at school, she had much more than a grounding in almost every subject taught, and in several which were not taught. Sally, therefore, was from the first a considerable irritant to the mistresses. She was always two years or more below the average age of her form. She had a real technique of acquiring knowledge. She respected learning in her preceptors and detected its absence. I once tried to find out in what subject Dr. Tessler had obtained his doctorate. I failed, but, of course, one then expected a German to be a doctor.

It was the first school Sally had attended. I was a member of the form to which she was originally assigned, but in which she remained for less than a week, so eclipsing to the rest of us was her mass of information. She was thirteen years and five months old at the time, nearly a year younger than I. (I owe it to myself to say that I was promoted at the end of the term, and thereafter more or less kept pace with the prodigy, although this, perhaps, was for special reasons.) Her hair was remarkably beautiful; a perfect light blonde, and lustrous with brushing, although cut short and "done" in no particular way, indeed usually very untidy. She had dark eyes, a pale skin, a large, distinguished nose, and a larger mouth. She had also a slim but precocious figure, which later put me in mind of Tessa in "The Constant Nymph." For better or for worse, there was no school uniform, and Sally invariably appeared in a dark-blue dress of foreign aspect and extreme simplicity, which nonetheless distinctly became her looks. As she grew, she seemed to wear later editions of the same dress, new and enlarged, like certain publications.

Sally, in fact, was beautiful, but one would be unlikely ever to meet another so lovely who was so

entirely and genuinely unaware of the fact and of its implications. And, of course, her casualness about her appearance, and her simple clothes, added to her charm. Her disposition seemed kindly and easygoing in the extreme, and her voice was lazy to drawling. But Sally, nonetheless, seemed to live only in order to work; and although I was, I think, her closest friend (it was the urge to keep up with her which explained much of my own progress in the school), I learned very little about her. She seemed to have no pocket money at all: as this amounted to a social deficiency of the vastest magnitude and as my parents could afford to be and were generous, I regularly shared with her. She accepted the arrangement simply and warmly. In return she gave me frequent little presents of books: a copy of Goethe's *Faust* in the original language and bound in somewhat discouraging brown leather, and an edition of Petronius, with some remarkable drawings. Much later, when in need of money for a friend, I took the *Faust,* in no hopeful spirit, to Sotheby's. It proved to be a rebound first edition . . .

But it was a conversation about the illustrations in the Petronius (I was able to construe Latin fairly well for a girl, but the italics and long s's daunted me) which led me to the discovery that Sally knew more than any of us about the subject illustrated. Despite her startling range of information, she seemed then, and certainly for long after, completely disinterested in any personal way. It was as if she discoursed, in the gentlest, sweetest manner, about some distant far-off thing, or, to use a comparison absurdly hackneyed but here appropriate, about botany. It was an ordinary enough school, and sex was a preoccupation among us. Sally's attitude was surprisingly new and unusual. In the end she did ask me not to tell the others what she had just told me. "As if I would," I replied challengingly, but still musingly.

And in fact I didn't tell anyone until considerably later: when I found that I had learned from Sally things which no one else at all seemed to know, things which I sometimes think have in themselves influenced my life, so to say, not a little. Once I tried to work out how old Sally was at the time of this conversation. I think she could hardly have been more than fifteen.

In the end Sally won her university scholarship, and I just failed, but won the school's English Essay Prize, and also the Good Conduct Medal, which I deemed (and still deem) in the nature of a stigma, but believed, consolingly, to be awarded more to

my prosperous father than to me. Sally's conduct was in any case much better than mine, being indeed irreproachable. I had entered for the scholarship with the intention of forcing the examiners, in the unlikely event of my winning it, to bestow it upon Sally, who really needed it. When this doubtless impracticable scheme proved unnecessary, Sally and I parted company, she to her triumphs of the intellect, I to my lesser achievements. We corresponded intermittently, but decreasingly as our areas of common interest diminished. Ultimately, for a very considerable time, I lost sight of her altogether, although occasionally over the years I used to see reviews of her learned books, and encounter references to her in leading articles about the Classical Association and similar indispensable bodies. I took it for granted that by now we should have difficulty in communicating. I observed that Sally did not marry. One couldn't wonder, I foolishly and unkindly drifted into supposing . . .

When I was forty-one, two things happened which have a bearing on this narrative. The first was that a catastrophe befell me which led to my again taking up residence with my parents. Details are superfluous. The second thing was the death of Dr. Tessler.

I should probably have heard of Dr. Tessler's death in any case, for my parents, who, like me and the rest of the neighbors, had never set eyes upon him, had always regarded him with mild curiosity. As it was, the first I knew of it was when I saw the funeral. I was shopping on behalf of my mother and reflecting upon the vileness of things, when I observed old Mr. Orbit remove his hat, in which he always served, and briefly sink his head in prayer. Between the aggregations of Shredded Wheat in the window, I saw the passing shape of a very old-fashioned and therefore very ornate horse-drawn hearse. It bore a coffin covered in a pall of worn purple velvet, but there seemed to be no mourners at all.

"Didn't think never to see a 'orse 'earse again, Mr. Orbit," remarked old Mrs. Ring, who was ahead of me in the queue.

"Pauper funeral, I expect," said her friend, old Mrs. Edge.

"No such thing no more," said Mr. Orbit quite sharply, and replacing his hat. "That's Dr. Tessler's funeral. Don't suppose 'e 'ad no family come to look after things."

I believe the three white heads then got together and began to whisper, but on hearing the name, I had made towards the door. I looked out. The huge ancient hearse, complete with vast black plumes, looked much too big for the narrow autumnal street. It put

me in mind of how toys are often so grossly out of scale with one another. I could now see that instead of mourners, a group of urchins, shadowy in the fading light, ran behind the bier, shrieking and jeering, a most regrettable scene in a well-conducted township.

For the first time in months, if not years, I wondered about Sally.

Three days later she appeared without warning at my parents' front door. It was I who opened it.

"Hullo, Mel."

One hears of people who after many years take up a conversation as if the same number of hours had passed. This was a case in point. Sally, moreover, looked almost wholly unchanged. Possibly her lustrous hair was a half shade darker, but it was still short and wild. Her lovely white skin was unwrinkled. Her large mouth smiled sweetly but, as always, somewhat absently. She was dressed in the most ordinary clothes but still managed to look like anything but a don or a dominie, although neither did she look like a woman of the world. It was, I reflected, hard to decide what she did look like.

"Hullo, Sally."

I kissed her and began to condole.

"Father really died before I was born. You know that."

"I have heard something."

I should not have been sorry to hear more, but Sally threw off her coat, sank down before the fire, and said, "I've read all your books. I loved them. I should have written."

"Thank you," I said. "I wish there were more who felt like you."

"You're an artist, Mel. You can't expect to be a success at the same time." She was warming her white hands. I was not sure that I was an artist, but it was nice to be told.

There was a circle of leather-covered armchairs round the fire. I sat down beside her. "I've read about you often in the *Times Lit*," I said, "but that's all. For years. Much too long."

"I'm glad you're still living here," she replied.

"Not *still*. Again."

"Oh?" She smiled in her gentle, absent way.

"Following a session in the frying pan and another one in the fire . . . I'm sure you've been conducting yourself more sensibly." I was still fishing.

But all she said was, "Anyway, I'm still glad you're living here."

"Can't say I am. But why in particular?"

"Silly Mel! Because I'm going to live here too."

I had never even thought of it.

I could not resist a direct question.

"Who told you your father was ill?"

"A friend. I've come all the way

from Asia Minor. I've been looking at potsherds." She was remarkably untanned for one who had been living under the sun, but her skin was of the kind which does not tan readily.

"It will be lovely to have you about again. Lovely, Sally. But what will you do here?"

"What do *you* do?"

"I write . . . In other ways my life is rather over, I feel."

"I write too. Sometimes. At least I edit . . . And I don't think my life, properly speaking, has ever begun."

I had spoken in self-pity, although I had not wholly meant to do so. The tone of her reply I found it impossible to define. Certainly, I thought with slight malice, certainly she does look absurdly virginal.

A week later a van arrived at Dr. Tessler's house, containing a great number of books, a few packed trunks, and little else; and Sally moved in. She offered no further explanation for this gesture of semiretirement from the gay world (for we lived about forty miles from London, too many for urban participation, too few for rural self-sufficiency), but it occurred to me that Sally's resources were doubtless not so large that she could disregard an opportunity to live rent-free, although I had no idea whether the house was freehold, and there was no mention even of a will. Sally was and always had been so vague about practicalities that I was a little worried about these matters, but she declined ideas of help. There was no doubt that if she were to offer the house for sale, she could not expect from the proceeds an income big enough to enable her to live elsewhere, and I could imagine that she shrank from the bother and uncertainty of letting.

I heard about the contents of the van from Mr. Ditch, the remover, and it was, in fact, not until she had been in residence for about ten days that Sally sent me an invitation. During this time and after she had refused my help with her affairs, I had thought it best to leave her alone. Now, although the house which I must henceforth think of as hers, stood only about a quarter of a mile from the house of my parents, she sent me a postcard. It was a picture postcard of Mytilene. She asked me to tea.

The way was through the avenues and round the corners of a midnineteenth-century housing estate for merchants and professional men. My parents' house was intended for the former, Sally's for the latter. It stood, in fact, at the very end of a cul-de-sac: even now the house opposite bore the plate of a dentist.

I had often stared at the house during Dr. Tessler's occupancy and before I knew Sally, but not

until that day did I enter it. The outside looked much as it had ever done. The house was built in a grey brick so depressing that one speculated how anyone could ever come to choose it (as many once did, however, throughout the Home Counties). To the right of the front door (approached by twelve steps, with blue and white tessellated risers) protruded a greatly disproportionate obtuse-angled bay window: it resembled the thrusting nose on a grey and wrinkled face. This bay window served the basement, the ground floor, and the first floor: between the two latter ran a dull-red string course "in an acanthus pattern", like a chaplet round the temples of a dowager. From the second-floor window it might have been possible to step onto the top of the projecting bay, the better to view the dentist's office opposite, had not the second-floor window been barred, doubtless as protection for a nursery. The wooden gate had fallen from its hinges and had to be lifted open and shut. It was startlingly heavy.

The bell was in order.

Sally was, of course, alone in the house.

Immediately she opened the door (which included two large tracts of colored glass), I apprehended a change in her, essentially the first change in all the time I had known her, for the woman who had come to my parents' house a fortnight or three weeks before had seemed to me very much the girl who had joined my class when we were both children. But now there was a difference . . .

In the first place she looked different. Previously there had always been a distinction about her appearance, however inexpensive her clothes. Now she wore a fawn jumper which needed washing and stained, creaseless grey slacks. When a woman wears trousers, they need to be smart. These were slacks indeed. Sally's hair was not so much picturesquely untidy as in the past but, more truly, in bad need of trimming. She wore distasteful sandals. And her expression had altered.

"Hullo, Mel. Do you mind sitting down and waiting for the kettle to boil?" She showed me into the ground-floor room (although to make possible the basement, it was cocked high in the air) with the bay window. "Just throw your coat on a chair." She bustled precipitately away. It occurred to me that Sally's culinary aplomb had diminished since her busy childhood of legend.

The room was horrible. I had expected eccentricity, discomfort, bookworminess, even perhaps the slightly macabre. But the room was entirely commonplace, and in the most unpleasing fashion. The furniture had probably been mass-produced in the early twenties. It

was of the kind which it is impossible, by any expenditure of time and polish, to keep in good order. The carpet was dingy jazz. There were soulless little pictures in gilt frames. There were dreadful modern knickknacks. There was a radio set, obviously long broken . . . For the time of year, the rickety, smoky fire offered none too much heat. Rejecting Sally's invitation, I drew my coat about me.

There was nothing to read except a prewar copy of "Tit-Bits," which I found on the floor under the lumpy settee. Like Sally's jumper the dense lace curtains could have done with a wash. But before long Sally appeared with tea: six uniform pink cakes from the nearest shop and a flavorless liquid full of floating "strangers." The crockery accorded with the other appurtenances.

I asked Sally whether she had started work of any kind.

"Not yet," she replied, a little dourly. "I've got to get things going in the house first."

"I suppose your father left things in a mess?"

She looked at me sharply. "Father never went out of his library."

She seemed to suppose that I knew more than I did. Looking round me, I found it hard to visualize a "library." I changed the subject.

"Aren't you going to find it rather a big house for one?"

It seemed a harmless, though uninspired, question. But Sally, instead of answering, simply sat staring before her. Although it was more as if she stared within her at some unpleasant thought.

I believe in acting upon impulse.

"Sally," I said, "I've got an idea. Why don't you sell this house, which *is* much too big for you, and come and live with me? We've plenty of room, and my father is the soul of generosity."

She only shook her head. "Thank you, Mel. No." She still seemed absorbed by her own thoughts, disagreeable thoughts.

"You remember what you said the other day. About being glad I was living here. I'm likely to go on living here. I'd love to have you with me, Sally. Please think about it."

She put down her ugly little teaplate on the ugly little table. She had taken a single small bite out of her pink cake. She stretched out her hand towards me, very tentatively, not nearly touching me. She gulped slightly. "Mel—"

I moved to take her hand, but she drew it back. Suddenly she shook her head violently. Then she began to talk about her work.

She did not resume eating or drinking, and indeed both the cakes and the tea, which every now and then she pressed upon me in a casual way more like her

former manner, were remarkably unappetizing. But she talked interestingly and familiarly for about half an hour—about indifferent matters. Then she said, "Forgive me, Mel. But I must be getting on."

She rose. Of course I rose too. Then I hesitated.

"Sally . . . Please think about it. I'd like it so much. Please."

"Thank you, Mel. I'll think about it."

"Promise?"

"Promise . . . Thank you for coming to see me."

"I want to see much more of you."

She stood in the open front door. In the dusk she looked inexplicably harassed and woebegone.

"Come and see me whenever you want. Come to tea tomorrow and stay to dinner." Anything to get her out of that horrible, horrible house.

But, as before, she only said, "I'll think about it."

Walking home it seemed to me that she could only have invited me out of obligation. I was much hurt, and much frightened by the change in her. As I reached my own gate it struck me that the biggest change of all was that she had never once smiled.

When five or six days later I had neither seen nor heard from Sally, I wrote asking her to visit me. For several days she did not reply at all; then she sent me another picture postcard, this time of some ancient bust in a museum, informing me that she would love to come when she had a little more time. I noticed that she had made a slight error in my address, which she had hastily and imperfectly corrected. The postman, of course, knew me. I could well imagine that there was much to do in Sally's house. Indeed, it was a house of the kind in which the work is never either satisfying or complete: an ever-open mouth of a house. But despite the tales of her childhood, I could not imagine the Sally I knew doing it . . . I could not imagine what she was doing, and I admit that I did want to know.

Some time after that I came across Sally in the International Stores. It was not a shop I usually patronized, but Mr. Orbit was out of my father's particular pickles. I could not help wondering whether Sally did not remember perfectly well that it was a shop in which I was seldom found.

She was there when I entered. She was wearing the same grimy slacks and this time a white blouse which was worse than her former jumper, being plainly filthy. Against the autumn she wore a blue raincoat, which I believed to be the same she had worn to school. She looked positively unkempt and far from well. She was

nervously shoveling a little heap of dark-blue bags and gaudy packets into a very ancient carryall. Although the shop was fairly full, no one else was waiting to be served at the part of the counter where Sally stood. I walked up to her.

"Good morning, Sally."

She clutched the ugly carryall to her, as if I were about to snatch it. Then at once she became ostentatiously relaxed.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. There was an upsetting little rasp in her voice. "After all, Mel, you're not my mother." Then she walked out of the shop.

"Your change, miss," cried the International Stores' clerk after her.

But she was gone. The other women in the shop watched her go as if she were the town tart. Then they closed up along the section of counter where she had been standing.

"Poor thing," said the clerk unexpectedly. He was young. The other women looked at him malevolently and gave their orders with conscious briskness.

Then came Sally's accident.

By this time there could be no doubt that something was much wrong with her, but I had always been very nearly her only friend in the town, and her behavior to me made it difficult for me to help. It was not that I lacked will or, I think, courage but that I was unable to decide how to set about the task. I was still thinking about it when Sally was run over. I imagine that her trouble, whatever it was, had affected her ordinary judgment. Apparently she stepped right under a truck in the High Street, having just visited the Post Office. I learned shortly afterwards that she refused to have letters delivered at her house but insisted upon them being left poste restante.

When she had been taken to the Cottage Hospital, the matron, Miss Garvice, sent for me. Everyone knew that I was Sally's friend.

"Do you know who is her next of kin?"

"I doubt whether she has such a thing in this country."

"Friends?"

"Only I that I know of." I had always wondered about the mysterious informant of Dr. Tessler's passing.

Miss Garvice considered for a moment.

"I'm worried about her house. Strictly speaking, in all the circumstances, I suppose I ought to tell the police and ask them to keep an eye on it. But I am sure she would prefer me to ask you."

From her tone I rather supposed that Miss Garvice knew nothing of the recent changes in Sally. Or perhaps she thought it best to ignore them.

"As you live so close, I wonder if it would be too much to ask you just to look in every now and

then? Perhaps daily might be best?"

I think I accepted mainly because I suspected that something in Sally's life might need, for Sally's sake, to be kept from the wrong people.

"Here are her keys."

It was a numerous assembly for such a commonplace establishment as Sally's.

"I'll do it as I say, Miss Garvice. But how long do you think it will be?"

"Hard to say. But I don't think Sally's going to die."

One trouble was that I felt compelled to face the assignment unaided, because I knew no one in the town who seemed likely to regard Sally's predicament with the sensitiveness and delicacy—and indeed love—which I suspected were essential. There was also a dilemma about whether or not I should explore the house. Doubtless I had no right, but to do so might, on the other hand, possibly be regarded as in Sally's "higher interests." I must acknowledge, nontheless, that my decision to proceed was considerably inspired by curiosity. This did not mean that I should involve others in whatever might be disclosed. Even that odious sitting room would do Sally's reputation no good . . .

Miss Garvice had concluded by suggesting that I perhaps ought to pay my first visit at once. I went home to lunch. Then I set out.

Among the first things I discovered were that Sally kept every single door of the house locked and that the remains of the tea I had taken with her weeks before still lingered in the sitting room, not, mercifully, the food, but the plates and cups and genteel little knives and the teapot with leaves and liquor at the bottom of it.

Giving onto the passage from the front door was a room adjoining the sitting room and corresponding to it at the back of the house. Presumably one of these rooms was intended by the builder (the house was not a kind to have had an architect) for use as a dining room, the other as a drawing room. I went through the keys. There were big keys, the doors and locks being pretentiously oversized. In the end the door opened. I noticed a stale cold smell. The room appeared to be in complete darkness. Possibly Dr. Tessler's library?

I groped round the inside of the door frame for an electric light switch but could find nothing. I took another half step inside. The room seemed blacker than ever, and the stale cold smell somewhat stronger. I decided to defer exploration until later.

I shut the door and went upstairs. The ground-floor rooms were high, which made the stairs many and steep.

On the first floor were two rooms, corresponding in plan to

the other two rooms below. It could be called neither an imaginative design nor a convenient one. I tried the front room first, again going through the rigmarole with the keys. The room was in a dilapidated condition and contained nothing but a considerable mass of papers. They appeared once to have been stacked on the bare floor, but the stacks had long since fallen over, and their component elements had accumulated a deep top-dressing of flaky black particles. The grime was of that ultimate kind which seems to have an actually greasy consistency: the idea of further investigating those neglected masses of scroll and manuscript made me shudder.

The back room was a bedroom, presumably Sally's. All the curtains were drawn, and I had to turn on the light. It contained what must truly be termed, in the worn phrase, "a few sticks of furniture;" all in the same period as the pieces in the sitting room, though more exiguous and spidery looking. The inflated size and height of the room, the heavy plaster cornice, and even heavier plaster rose in the center of the cracked ceiling emphasized the sparseness of the anachronistic furnishings. There was, however, a more modern double-divan bed, very low on the floor, and looking as if it had been slept in but not remade for weeks. Someone seemed to have arisen rather suddenly, as at an alarm clock. I tried to pull open a drawer in the rickety dressing table. It squeaked and stuck, and proved to contain some pathetic-looking underclothes of Sally's. The long curtains were very heavy and dark green.

It was a depressing investigation, but I persisted.

The second floor gave the appearance of having been originally one room, reached from a small landing. There was marked evidence of unskilled cuttings and botches, aimed, it was clear, at partitioning off this single vast room in order to form a bathroom and lavatory, and a passage giving access thereto. Could the house have been originally built without these necessary amenities? Anything seemed possible. I remembered the chestnut about the architect who forgot the staircase.

But there was something here which I found not only squalid but vaguely frightening. The original door, giving from the small landing into the one room, showed every sign of having been forcibly burst open and from the inside (characteristically, it had been hung to open outwards). The damage was seemingly not recent (although it is not easy to date such a thing), but the shattered door still hung dejectedly outward from its weighty lower hinge only and, in fact, made it almost impossible to enter the room at all. Gingerly I forced it a little more

forward. The ripped woodwork of the heavy door shrieked piercingly as I dragged at it. I looked in. The room, such as it had ever been, had been finally wrecked by the introduction of the batten partition which separated it from the bathroom and was covered with blistered dark-brown varnish. The only contents were a few decaying toys. The nursery, as I remembered from the exterior prospect. Through the gap between the sloping door and its frame, I looked at the barred windows. Like everything else in the house, the bars seemed very heavy. I looked again at the toys. I observed that *all* of them seemed to be woolly animals. They were rotted with moth and mold, but not so much so as to conceal the fact that at least some of them appeared also to have been mutilated. There were the decomposing leg of a teddy bear, inches away from the main torso; the severed head of a fanciful stuffed bird. It was as unpleasant a scene as every other in the house.

What had Sally been doing all day? As I had suspected, clearly not cleaning the house. There remained the kitchen quarters, and, of course, the late doctor's library.

There were odd scraps of food about the basement, and signs of recent though sketchy cooking. I was almost surprised to discover that Sally had not lived on air. In general, however, the basement suggested nothing more unusual than the familiar feeling of wonder at the combined magnitude and cumbrousness of cooking operations in the homes of our middle-class great-grandfathers.

I looked round for a candle with which to illumine the library. I even opened various drawers, bins, and cupboards. It seemed that there were no candles. In any case, I thought, shivering slightly in the descending dusk, the library was probably a job for more than a single candle. Next time I would provide myself with my father's imposing flashlight.

There seemed nothing more to be done. I had not even taken off my coat. I had discovered little which was calculated to solve the mystery. Could Sally be doping herself? It really semed a theory. I turned off the kitchen light, ascended to the ground floor, and shutting the front door, descended again to the garden. I eyed the collapsed front gate with new suspicion. Some time later I realized that I had relocked none of the inside doors.

Next morning I called at the Cottage Hospital.

"In a way," said Miss Garvice, "she's much better. Quite surprisingly so."

"Can I see her?"

"I'm afraid not. She's unfortunately had a very restless night."

Miss Garvice was sitting at her desk with a large yellow cat in her lap. As she spoke, the cat looked up into her face with a look of complacent interrogation.

"Not in pain?"

"Not exactly, I think." Miss Garvice turned the cat's head downward towards her knee. She paused before saying, "She's been weeping all night. And talking too. More hysterical than delirious. In the end we had to move her out of the big ward."

"What does she say?"

"It wouldn't be fair to our patients if we repeated what they say when they're not themselves."

"I suppose not. Still—"

"I admit that I cannot at all understand what's the matter with her. With her mind, I mean, of course."

"She's suffering from shock."

"Yes . . . But when I said 'mind,' I should perhaps have said 'emotions.' " The cat jumped from Miss Garvice's lap to the floor. It began to rub itself against my stockings. Miss Garvice followed it with her eyes. "Were you able to get to her house?"

"I looked in for a few minutes."

Miss Garvice wanted to question me, but she stopped herself and asked, "Everything in order?"

"As far as I could see."

"I wonder if you would collect together a few things and bring them when you next come. I am sure I can leave it to you."

"I'll see what I can do." Remembering the house, I wondered what I *could* do. I rose. "I'll look in tomorrow, if I may." The cat followed me to the door purring. "Perhaps I shall be able to see Sally then."

Miss Garvice only nodded.

The truth was that I could not rest until I had investigated that back room. I was afraid, of course, but much more curious. Even my fear, I felt, perhaps wrongly, was more fear of the unknown than of anything I imagined myself likely in fact to find. Had there been a sympathetic friend available, I should have been glad of his company (it was a job for a man, or for no one). As it was, loyalty to Sally sent me, as before, alone.

During the morning it had become more and more overcast. In the middle of lunch it began to rain. Throughout the afternoon it rained more and more heavily. My mother said I was mad to go out, but I donned a pair of heavy walking shoes and my riding mackintosh. I had borrowed my father's flashlight before he left that morning for his business.

I first entered the sitting room, where I took off my mackintosh and saturated beret. It would perhaps have been more sensible to hang the dripping objects in the lower regions, but I think I felt it wise not to leave them too far from the front door. I stood for a

time in front of the mirror combing my matted hair. The light was fading fast, and it was difficult to see very much. The gusty wind hurled the rain against the big bay window, down which it descended like a rippling membrane of wax, distorting what little prospect remained outside. The window frame leaked copiously, making little pools on the floor.

I pulled up the collar of my sweater, took the flashlight, and entered the back room. Almost at once in the beam of light, I found the switch. It was placed at the normal height but about three feet from the doorway, as if the intention were precisely to make it impossible for the light to be switched on—or off—from the door. I turned it on.

I had speculated extensively, but the discovery still surprised me. Within the original walls had been laid three courses of stonework, which continued overhead to form an arched vault under the ceiling. The grey stones had been unskillfully laid, and the vault in particular looked likely to collapse. The inside of the door was reinforced with a single sheet of iron. There remained no window at all. A crude system of electric lighting had been installed, but there seemed provision for neither heating nor ventilation. Conceivably the room was intended for use in air raids; it had palpably been in existence for some time. But in that case it was hard to see why it should still be inhabited as it so plainly was . . .

For within the dismal place were many rough wooden shelves laden with crumbling brown books, several battered wooden armchairs, a large desk covered with papers, and a camp bed, showing, like the bed upstairs, signs of recent occupancy. Most curious of all were a small ashtray by the bedside choked with cigarette ends, and an empty coffee cup. I lifted the pillow: underneath it were Sally's pajamas, not folded, but stuffed away out of sight. It was difficult to resist the unpleasant idea that she had begun by sleeping in the room upstairs but for some reason had moved down to this stagnant cavern, which, moreover, she had stated that her father had never left.

I like to think of myself as more imaginative than sensible. I had, for example, conceived it as possible that Dr. Tessler had been stark raving mad and that the room he never left would prove to be padded. But no room could be less padded than this one. It was much more like a prison. It seemed impossible that all through her childhood Sally's father had been under some kind of duress. The room also—and horridly—resembled a tomb. Could the doctor have been one of those vision-

aries who are given to brooding upon the End and to decking themselves with the symbols of mortality, like Donne with his shroud? It was difficult to believe in Sally emulating her father in this . . . For some time, I think, I fought off the most probable solution, carefully giving weight to every other suggestion which my mind could muster up. In the end I faced the fact that more than an oubliette or a grave, the place resembled a fortress, and the suggestion that there was something in the house against which protection was necessary, was imperative. The locked doors, the scene of ruin on the second floor, Sally's behavior. I had known it all the time.

I turned off the bleak light, hanging by its kinked flexible cord. As I locked the library door, I wondered upon the unknown troubles which might have followed my failure of yesterday to leave the house as I had found it. I walked the few steps down the passage from the library to the sitting room, at once preoccupied and alert. But, for my peace of mind, neither preoccupied nor alert enough. Because, although only for a moment, a second, a gleam, when in that almost vanished light I re-entered the sitting room, I saw him.

As if, for my benefit, to make the most of the little light, he stood right up in the big bay window. The view he presented to me was what I should call three-quarters back. But I could see a fraction of the outline of his face, entirely white (a thing which has to be seen to be believed) and with the skin drawn tight over the bones as by a tourniquet. There was a suggestion of wispy hair. I think he wore black, a garment, I thought, like a frock coat. He stood stooped and shadowy, except for the glimpse of white face. Of course I could not see his eyes. Needless to say, he was gone almost as soon as I beheld him, but it would be inexact to say that he went quite immediately. I had a scintilla of time in which to blink. I thought at first that dead or alive, it was Dr. Tessler, but immediately afterwards I thought not.

That evening I tried to take my father into my confidence. I had always considered him the kindest of men, but one from whom I had been carried far out to sea. Now I was interested, as often with people, by the unexpectedness of his response. After I had finished my story (although I did not tell him everything), to which he listened carefully, sometimes putting an intelligent question about a point I had failed to illuminate, he said, "If you want my opinion, I'll give it to you."

"Please."

"It's simple enough. The whole

affair is no business of yours." He smiled to take the sting out of the words, but underneath he seemed unusually serious.

"I'm fond of Sally. Besides Miss Garvice asked me."

"Miss Garvice asked you to look in and see if there was any post, not to poke about the house."

It was undoubtedly my weak point. But neither was it an altogether strong one for him. "Sally wouldn't let the postman deliver," I countered. "She was collecting her letters from the Post Office at the time she was run over. I can't imagine why."

"Don't try," said my father.

"But," I said, "what I saw? Even if I *had* no right to go all over the house."

"Mel," said my father, "you're supposed to write novels. Haven't you noticed by this time that everyone's lives are full of things you can't understand? The exceptional thing is the thing you *can* understand. I remember a man I knew when I was first in London . . ." He broke off. "But fortunately we don't *have* to understand. And for that reason we've no right to scrutinize other people's lives too closely."

Completely baffled, I said nothing.

My father patted me on the shoulder. "You can fancy you see things when the light's not very good, you know. Particularly an artistic girl like you, Mel."

Even by my parents I still liked occasionally to be called a girl.

When I went up to bed, it struck me that again something had been forgotten. This time it was Sally's "few things."

Naturally it was the first matter Miss Garvice mentioned.

"I'm very sorry. I forgot. I think it must have been the rain," I continued, excusing myself like an adolescent to authority.

Miss Garvice very slightly clucked her tongue. But her mind was on something else. She went to the door of her room.

"Serena!"

"Yes, Miss Garvice?"

"See that I'm not disturbed for a few minutes, will you please? I'll call you again."

"Yes, Miss Garvice," Serena disappeared, shutting the door.

"I want to tell you something in confidence."

I smiled. Confidences preannounced are seldom worthwhile.

"You know our routine here. We've been making various tests on Sally. One of them roused our suspicion." Miss Garvice scraped a match on the composition striker which stood on her desk. For the moment she had forgotten the relative cigarette. "Did you know that Sally was pregnant?"

"No," I replied. But it might provide an explanation. Of a few things.

"Normally, of course, I shouldn't tell you. Or anyone else. But Sally is in such a hysterical state. And you say you know of no relatives?"

"None. What can I do?"

"I wonder if you would consider having her to stay with you? Not at once, of course. When we discharge her. Sally's going to need a friend."

"She won't come Or she wouldn't. I've already pressed her."

Miss Garvice now was puffing away like a traction engine. "Why did you do that?"

"I'm afraid that's my business."

"You don't know who the father is?"

I said nothing.

"It's not as if Sally were a young girl. To be perfectly frank, there are things about her condition which I don't like."

It was my turn for a question.

"What about the accident? Hasn't that affected matters?"

"Strangely enough, no. Although it's nothing less than a miracle. Of one kind or the other," said Miss Garvice, trying to look broad-minded.

I felt that we were unlikely to make further progress. Assuring Miss Garvice that in due course I should invite Sally once more, I asked again if I could see her.

"I am sorry. But it's out of the question for Sally to see anyone."

I was glad that Miss Garvice did not revert to the subject of Sally's "few things," although, despite everything, I felt guilty for having forgotten them. Particularly because I had no wish to go back for them. It was out of the question even to think of explaining my real reasons to Miss Garvice, and loyalty to Sally continued to weigh heavily with me, but something must be devised. Moreover I must not take any step which might lead to someone else being sent to Sally's house. The best I could think of was to assemble some of my own "things" and say they were Sally's. It would be for Sally to accept the substitution.

But the question which struck me next morning was whether the contamination in Sally's house could be brought to an end by steps taken in the house itself, or whether it could have influence outside. Sally's mysterious restlessness, as reported by Miss Garvice, was far from reassuring, but on the whole I inclined to see it as an aftermath or revulsion. (Sally's pregnancy I refused at this point to consider at all.) It was impossible to doubt that immediate action of some kind was vital. Exorcism? Or, conceivably, arson? I doubt whether I am one to whom the former would ever strongly appeal: certainly not as a means of routing something so apparently sensible to feeling as to sight. The latter, on the other hand, might

well be defeated (apart from other difficulties) by that stone strongbox of a library. Flight? I considered it long and seriously. But still it seemed that my strongest motive in the whole affair was pity for Sally. So I stayed.

I did not visit the hospital that morning, from complete perplexity as to what there was to do or say, but instead, during the afternoon, wandered back to the house. Despite my horror of the place, I thought that I might hit upon something able to suggest a course of action. I would look more closely at those grimy papers, and even at the books in the library. The idea of burning the place down was still by no means out of my mind. I would further ponder the inflammability of the house, and the degree of risk to the neighbors . . . All the time, of course, I was completely miscalculating my own strength and what was happening to me.

But as I hoisted the fallen gate, my nerve suddenly left me, again, something which had never happened to me before, either in the course of these events or at any previous time. I felt very sick. I was much afraid lest I faint. My body felt simultaneously tense and insubstantial.

Then I became aware that Mr. Orbit's delivery boy was staring at me from the gate of the dentist's house opposite. I must have presented a queer spectacle, because the boy seemed to be standing petrified. His mouth, I saw, was wide open. I knew the boy quite well. It was essential for all kinds of reasons that I conduct myself suitably. The boy stood, in fact, for public opinion. I took a couple of deep breaths, produced the weighty bunch of keys from my handbag, and ascended the steps as steadily as possible.

Inside the house, I made straight for the basement, with a view to a glass of water. With Mr. Orbit's boy no longer gaping at me, I felt worse than ever, so that, even before I could look for a tumbler or reach the tap, I had to sink upon one of the two battered kitchen chairs. All my hair was damp, and my clothes felt unbearably heavy.

Then I became aware that steps were descending the basement staircase.

I completed my sequence of new experiences by fainting.

I came round to the noise of an animal, a snuffling, grunting cry, which seemed to come, with much persistence, from the floor above. I seemed to listen to it for some time, even trying, though failing, to identify what animal it was, before recovering more fully and realizing that Sally was leaning back against the dresser and staring at me.

"Sally! It was you."

"Who did you think it was? It's my house."

She no longer wore the stained grey slacks, but was dressed in a very curious way, about which I do not think it fair to say more. In other ways also, the change in her had become complete: her eyes had a repulsive lifelessness; the bone structure of her face, previously so fine, had altered unbelievably. There was an unpleasant croak in her voice, precisely as if her larynx had lost flexibility.

"Will you please return my keys?"

I even had difficulty in understanding what she said, although doubtless my shaky condition did not help. Very foolishly, I rose to my feet, while Sally glared at me with her changed eyes. I had been lying on the stone floor. There was a bad pain in the back of my head and neck.

"Glad to see you're better, Sally. I didn't expect you'd be about for some time yet." My words were incredibly foolish.

She said nothing, but only stretched out her hand. It too was changed: it was grey and bony, with protruding, knotted veins.

I handed her the big bunch of keys. I wondered how she had entered the house without them. The animal wailing above continued without intermission. To it now seemed to be added a noise which struck me as resembling that of a pig scrabbling. Involuntarily I glanced upwards to the ceiling.

Sally snatched the keys, snatched them gently and softly, not violently; then she cast her unblinking eyes upwards in parody of mine, and emitted an almost deafening shriek of laughter.

"Do you love children, Mel? Would you like to see my baby?"

Truly it was the last straw, and I do not know quite how I behaved.

Now Sally seemed filled with terrible pride. "Let me tell you, Mel," she said, "that it's possible for a child to be born in a manner you'd never dream of."

I had begun to shudder again, but Sally clutched hold of me with her grey hand and began to drag me up the basement stairs.

"Will you be godmother? Come and see your godchild, Mel."

The noise was coming from the library. I clung to the top of the basement baluster. Distraught as I was, I now realized that the scrabbling sound was connected with the tearing-to-pieces of Dr. Tessler's books. But it was the wheezy, throaty cry of the creature which most turned my heart and sinews to water.

Or to steel. Because as Sally tugged at me, trying to pull me away from the baluster and into the library, I suddenly realized that she had no strength at all. Whatever else had happened to her, she was as weak as a wraith.

I dragged myself free from her, let go of the baluster, and made

towards the front door. Sally began to scratch my face and neck, but I made a quite capable job of defending myself. Sally then began to call out in her unnatural voice: she was trying to summon the creature into the passage. She scraped and tore at me, while panting out a stream of dreadful endearments to the thing in the library.

In the end, I found that my hands were about her throat, which was bare despite the cold weather. I could stand no more of that wrecked voice. Immediately she began to kick, and the shoes she was wearing seemed to have metal toes. I had the final, awful fancy that she had acquired iron feet. Then I threw her from me onto the floor of the passage, and fled from the house.

It was now dark, somehow darker outside the house than inside it, and I found that I still had strength enough to run all the way home.

I went away for a fortnight, although on general grounds it was the last thing I had wanted to do. At the end of that time and with Christmas drawing near, I returned to my parents' house: I was not going to permit Sally to upset my plan for a present way of life.

At intervals through the winter I peered at Sally's house from the corner of the cul-de-sac in which it stood, but never saw a sign of occupancy or change.

I had learned from Miss Garvice that Sally had simply "disappeared" from the Cottage Hospital.

"Disappeared?"

"Long before she was due for discharge, I need hardly say."

"How did it happen?"

"The night nurse was going her rounds and noticed that the bed was empty."

Miss Garvice was regarding me as if I were a material witness. Had we been in Miss Garvice's room at the hospital, Serena would have been asked to see that we were not disturbed.

Sally had not been back long enough to be much noticed in the town, and I observed that soon no one mentioned her at all.

Then, one day between Easter and Whitsun, I found she was at the front door.

"Hullo, Mel."

Again she was taking up the conversation. She was as until last autumn she had always been, with that strange, imperishable and untended prettiness of hers and her sweet, absent smile. She wore a white dress.

"Sally!" What could one say?

Our eyes met. She saw that she would have to come to the point.

"I've sold my house."

I kept my head. "I said it was too big for you. Come in."

She entered.

"I've bought a villa. In the Cyclades."

"For your work?"

She nodded. "The house fetched a price, of course. And my father left me more than I expected."

I said something banal.

Already she was lying on the big sofa and looking at me over the arm. "Mel, I should like you to come and stay with me. For a long time. As long as you can. You're a free agent, and you can't want to stay here."

Psychologists, I recollected, have ascertained that the comparative inferiority of women in contexts described as purely intellectual, is attributable to the greater discouragement and repression of their curiosity when children.

"Thank you, Sally. But I'm quite happy here, you know."

"You're *not*. Are you, Mel?"

"No. I'm not."

"Well, then?"

One day I shall probably go.

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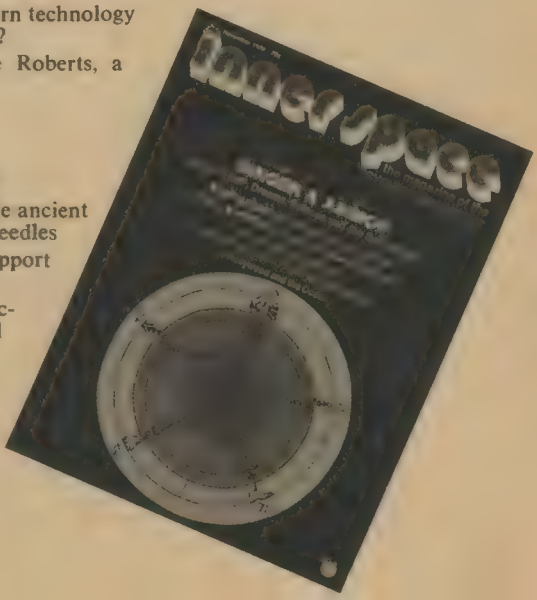

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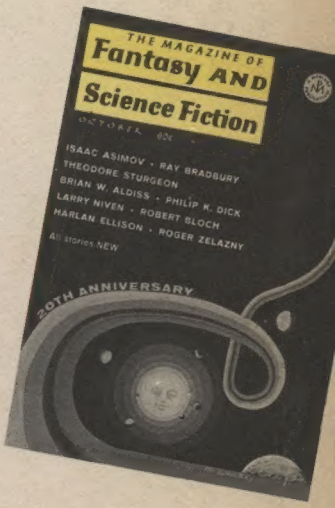

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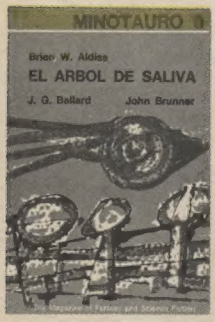

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